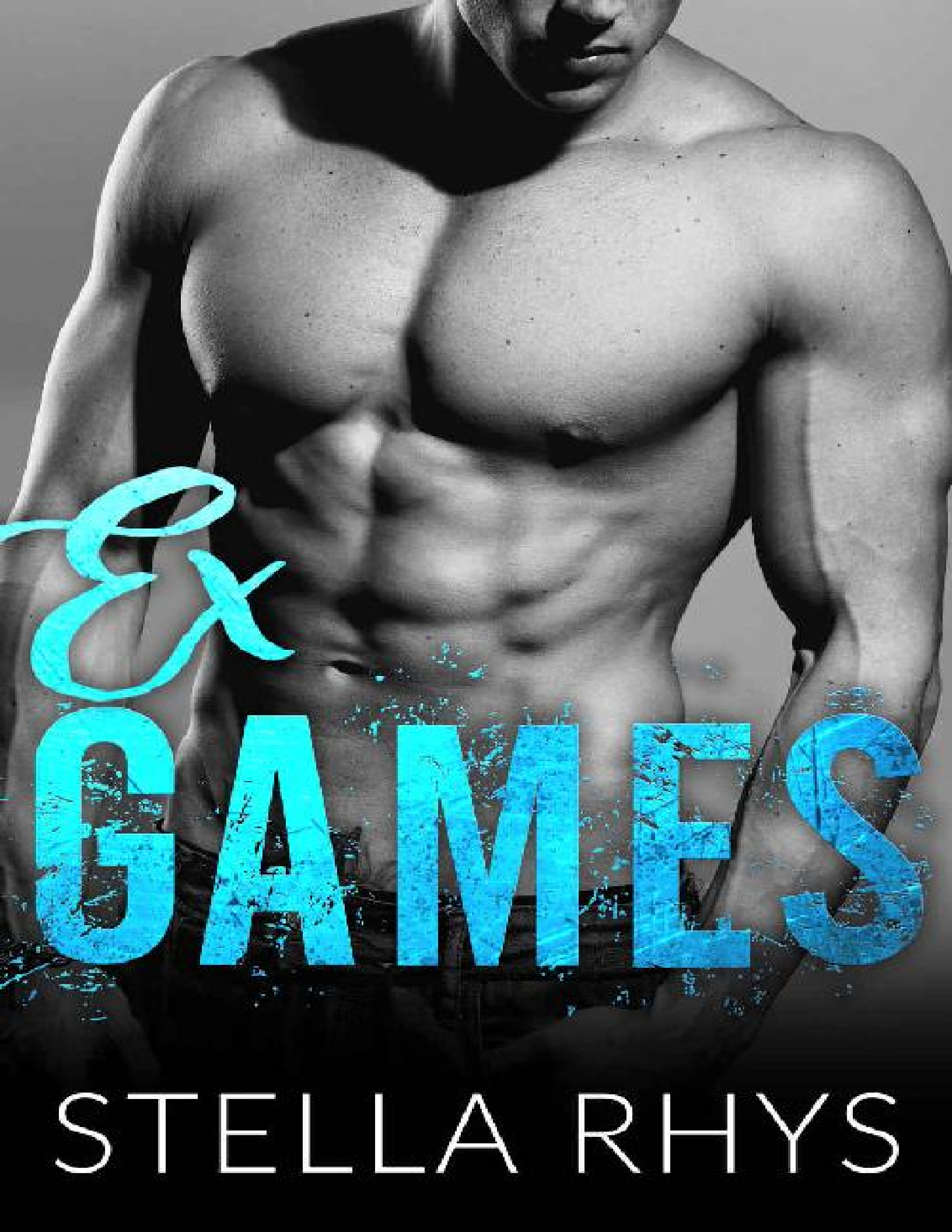

Ex
GAMES
STELLA RHYS

EX GAMES

by
Stella Rhys

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Bonus Material: IN TOO DEEP by Stella Rhys

What's ice-cold but hotter than hell? Rebounding with your ex's brother, of course.

A perfect storm led me to this place. Ghosted by my fiancé, I was suddenly broke, heartbroken and facing eviction. Enter Mason Leo, the six feet and two inches of pure muscle and arrogance I've hated with a passion since the day we met. The man is cocky, womanizing and ruinously gorgeous.

Worse than that, he's my ex's brother. And for the next two weeks, he gets to do with me as he pleases.

I'll explain.

With both our exes – wait for it – set to *marry* each other in St. Lucia, I've agreed to let Mason pay my debts so long as I play his date. My only job is to keep my clothes on while I get my closure. Because as much as I hate Mason Leo, the man is a walking sex god. And in the name of revenge, he gets to take me out, show me off – dress, touch and kiss me with those wicked lips. It's all for show, but every night with him brings more drinks, more drama and another temptation, so no matter what I do, I can't stop reminding myself this:

There's absolutely no good to come from f*cking my ex's brother.

No matter how good it'll feel.

Chapter One

Mondays had a bad rap but since the breakup, Wednesdays had become my mortal enemy.

I'd gone through nine of them since the one on which Aaron packed his bags overnight and left me with just a note on the kitchen table. Which was almost humorous, really, because for the last year of our three-year relationship, we had only two struggles: his inability to clean up after himself, and his refusal to write a card instead of agonize over gifts. Lucky for us, he finally got past both those struggles in one shot. Not so lucky for us, the achievement came in conjunction with him dumping me out of the blue, without so much as a word of explanation. Were it not for the goodbye he scribbled on the back of a Duane Reade receipt, I'd have alerted the press and filed a missing persons report.

Not that I didn't end up doing other dramatic things. Though to be fair, they sounded more dramatic than they were. On paper, calling Aaron's friends, colleagues, boss *and* a couple gym buddies might sound borderline-to-fully batshit insane, but in my own defense, I thought he had either lost his mind or been kidnapped by the Sicilian mafia.

Because nothing had led up to him leaving me.

Nothing. In fact, we'd had that steamy, breathy, fingers-tangled-in-his-hair kind of sex the night before. The last fight we'd gotten into was a petty one about the sheer amount of butt shots he liked on Instagram, and we settled that one fast with a new rule: No more double-tapping booties for Aaron as long as Taylor agreed to stop moaning every time she saw a picture of Charlie Hunnam. It was easy. We'd become so good at settling our silly stuff, and as far as I knew, silly stuff was all we had.

But then he left me. And all he gave me was that shitty note.

Tay. I hope you'll forgive me but I had to go. Please keep the ring because you have been nothing but amazing to me, and you don't deserve this at all. I don't have a choice, but I promise I love you. And I promise you'll move on. – A

I stood in the middle of the kitchen for a solid five minutes as the room spun around me. Then I snapped out of my daze and called him, all the while tearing through our Columbus Circle apartment for any clues that this was just a big, cruel joke.

He didn’t pick up, but it took two Wednesdays for me consider I might actually be single.

It took another till I realized I was.

Several more passed before I truly accepted that this was it. Aaron and I were over. Done.

The man who had seen me through my absolute worst trials and tribulations – the man I had spent the past six months *planning a wedding* with was gone. And not only that, he wanted to be. As it turned out, he had premeditated leaving me for at least a month considering he’d put in two weeks at his job, had a fucking *goodbye party* with his colleagues and even finagled his way off our lease, leaving me to pay solo for the four-grand-a-month studio he claimed we “needed” for its prestigious address.

That one left me dumbfounded all over again.

Because it was one thing to abandon me, but it really took some nerve to also leave me with the bills he knew I couldn’t afford alone. After all, *he* was the one who needed to impress his rich friends. *He* was the one who decided that we couldn’t reside anywhere but the thirtieth floor of a high rise, with a weekly maid service and the most absurdly expensive gym membership known to man. Since the rent came out of Aaron’s checking, I footed our other expenses and paid the difference owed every month.

It worked fine for three years.

But now, every last dollar sign was mine to tackle, including that of the cancellation fees from every vendor and venue we booked for the big fat wedding that wasn’t going to happen. It was like rubbing financial salt into the wounds of my life turned upside down.

Four Wednesdays ago, I picked up a night job as a waitress.

Two Wednesdays ago, I maxed out my second credit card.

Last Wednesday, I got a late notice on my rent, and I was sure it couldn’t possibly get shittier than that. But today, I woke up to something a solid thousand times worse than the last three combined because this Wednesday, the bad news was waiting impatiently outside my apartment and rapping nonstop on the door despite the fact that it was 7:15AM, and even if it weren’t, he had to know I’d want nothing to do with him. I generally preferred a good fifty streets separating me and the man whose guts I’d spent the past three years hating with every last fiber of my being.

“Taylor, come the fuck on. Open the goddamned door.”

Ever the charmer, that one.

Today, I got Aaron’s brother, Mason.

Chapter Two

"Taylor, I know you're in there. I can hear the TV."

Panicked, I popped up on the couch that had been my bed since the breakup. Throwing the sheets off my body, I shoved my hands between the pillows, my foggy morning brain convinced that Mason would go away if I just turned off the volume.

"Don't bother looking for the remote. I can clearly hear you watching The Real Housewives of Your Shitty Taste in TV."

Standing now, I cut my eyes to the door, trying to decide if I wanted to blow my cover with a retort.

"Trust me, I'd have no interest in being here if it weren't an emergency. And I'm trying to give you the chance to do this on your own terms. Either open the door or I will, and before you say I don't have a key, I do." He paused. "So for both our sakes, put on some pants."

Asshole. I tried to tell myself he was bluffing but my lips betrayed me. "Mason, don't you dare come in."

"There she is," his smug voice came back straightaway. "Morning, sunshine. Hope you slept well. Now open the door."

"I don't want to or have to. Whether I like it or not, this is my apartment now and mine alone."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it's not your apartment. You don't own this building, it's just a rental that you haven't paid for in a month, according to this gorgeous pink note I'm staring at."

Shit. My cheeks went aflame as I realized my landlord had left another notice. I tried to think of a response, but suddenly, I was frozen at the sound of metal jimmying in the lock of my door. *No way.* In my mind, I ran to grab the blanket on the couch and cover myself up. In reality, I stood there, useless and unmoving because despite knowing Mason Leo for three whole years, I was still shocked that he was in fact shitty enough to barge into my home without asking.

"Mase…" I watched the doorknob turn. "*Wait – "*

"Incoming."

With that casual announcement, the door swung open and my jaw hit the floor as Mason Leo strolled right into my home, wearing a damp white T-shirt and dark grey sweats. *Holy shit.* I froze, a knot jumping into my

throat because one, I'd never seen Mason in anything but an expensive suit and two, I'd never seen *this much* of him before. The cotton of his shirt was saturated in sweat and it clung to his every muscle. He'd been on a morning run and I could very much see that – as well as some rather clear outlines of six-pack.

And cock.

Wow.

Just like that, I forgot my instinct to cover myself up and suddenly, in a see-through shirt and ugly panties gifted by Sofia as a joke, I was standing before Mason Leo's famously lusted-for body, watching his blue eyes move leisurely up my bare legs and over every inch of my mortification. Silence stretched between us till finally, he raised his eyebrows and gave a low laugh.

"Well. The top half almost makes up for the bottom."

I blushed something furious, clasping my hands over my breasts before acknowledging the panties. "They were a gag gift."

"Gag or not, today's Wednesday." He squinted at the pink cursive on my crotch that read 'Sunday.' I snapped my fingers in front of my eyes.

"Up here. And I don't actually wear these according to the day," I sniped as he ignored me to amble into my kitchen and grab a mug out of the cupboard. "Please don't make yourself at home."

"I could never feel at home in a five hundred square foot studio."

Five-fifty, I thought bitterly as I tore my gaze off Mason's Superman shoulders stretching the life out of his shirt. Crossing my arms, I forced my stare elsewhere, instead watching his long fingers work the buttons on the espresso machine I never knew how to use. "Mason."

"God, I love how much irritation you fit into just the syllables of my name."

"Can you not act like you didn't just waltz into my apartment without asking?"

"How should I act then? Like I spent the night?" He turned around, his blue eyes glinting behind the fresh coffee he brought to his lips. "You'd need more of a glow to make that look convincing. But the hair's messy enough."

"Yeah, let's also not talk about made-up scenarios in which you and I have made any sort of physical contact," I said, heading for my dresser.

"Sorry. I must have misread the way you stared at my dick before."

“It was kind of just there, so don’t flatter yourself,” I retorted, cursing my bedroom-less apartment for the millionth time as I rifled through my drawer in clear view of Mason. “So, are you planning to tell me at all why you’re here? The only reason I haven’t called the cops is because I have a feeling that whatever you have to say has to do with your brother.”

“Don’t pin his existence all on me. He’s your ex, too.”

“I’m aware,” I scowled, yanking on a pair of yoga pants and crossing my arms over my chest. Standing across the studio from Mason, I cocked an inquisitive eyebrow. “So, what is it? Did you finally track him down?”

“Something like that. I didn’t get in direct contact with him yet, but I received something in the mail that pointed me in his direction.”

“What does that mean?”

From his back pocket, Mason took out a folded card. He held it out and when it was clear that he wouldn’t be walking it to me, I sighed and dragged my feet over to him. I didn’t want it to show but I was deathly curious about whatever the hell it was he had in his hand. But the second I got close enough to touch what he was holding, my heart beat out of my chest.

“What is this?” I whispered despite having a hunch once I plucked the card into my own fingers and felt its weight in my hand. *It can’t be.* It was a six by eight-inch rectangle and not just any kind, but one I knew well having looked recently through a million samples from a dozen different calligraphers. But I told myself it couldn’t be, and I tried to ignore the heat of Mason’s stare as I turned the embossed vellum around, letting my horror and confusion settle on the sweeping cursive printing three names I knew well.

~

Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Tully
Request the Honor of Your Presence
At the Marriage Of Their Daughter
Eva Cecilia Tully
To
Aaron Easton Leo
Saturday, the Seventeenth of December
At The Sundara Resort in St. Lucia

~

My stomach turned.

No.

No, no.

It was a misprint. It had to be. Eva Tully was the daughter of tech mogul Glenn Tully and his third wife, Ana Livia. She was also the swimsuit model who'd barked at me for spilling Cristal on her Manolos at her twenty-sixth birthday last year. Though I hadn't. She had. She was just too drunk to realize and Aaron urged to me take the blame, hissing, "Christ, Taylor, it's her *birthday*," though he might as well have said, "Don't fight her, she's *hot*."

And she was. Eva was also dating Mason at the time. In fact, they were running on a nearly six-month relationship at that point, which was apparently his longest since junior high. I knew that because Aaron tracked Mason's every move like some kind of secret paparazzo, and he anticipated Mason's potential nuptials in the most oddly obsessive manner. "I'll fucking kill myself if those two ever get married," he always used to mutter. Whenever I asked why, he'd say, "I'll never beat him." It was vague, but clear enough to make me feel like crap.

Of course, it made me feel even worse now that I was holding the invitation to their fucking *wedding*.

This isn't real. This isn't happening. Nauseous, I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to either process the information or wake up from the dream. *Aaron and Eva. Eva and Aaron*. I repeated their names over and over, and while it didn't make them feel any more real, tears started burning in my eyes. Nothing was sinking in and worse than that, Mason Leo was the only person I had to talk to. "I don't understand. What is this?"

"It's a fucking golf catalogue. What does it look like?"

"For God's sake, just tell me in *words*, Mason. I'm sure you can guess that my mind can't exactly wrap around this concept right now!"

"I can talk to you when you stop crying."

"Don't. Don't act like I'm being crazy or too emotional when you just handed me an invitation to a *wedding* between my *fiancé* and a woman who is not *me*," I seethed, turning away from him as the tears finally spilled. I trapped my sobs in my throat, refusing to let them out because I knew Mason would yell at me. But when a tiny one escaped, I heard more of a sigh.

“Taylor, I know this is a mindfuck. If it’s any consolation, it was probably Eva’s idea.”

“Why would she be with Aaron after being with *you?*” I demanded, blushing the second the question left my lips. But I couldn’t pinpoint why – at least not till I realized I was asking how a girl would settle for Aaron after having had Mason. *Jesus, what kind of question was that, Taylor?* I’d never entertained that way of thinking before. Ever. I had always loved having Aaron over Mason, no matter how hard my friends lusted over Mase and pressed me to confess that I fantasized about him. I didn’t. Not consciously, at least. Aaron was my choice Leo brother because he was handsome and smart and he made me feel safe because he wasn’t a heartless playboy.

He was loyal.

At least I thought he was.

Cheeks burning, I slowly returned wet eyes to Mason, waiting for him to pounce on my slip of tongue and point out that I’d given him a hugely inadvertent compliment. There was a glint of amusement in his eye that I wanted to strangle him for but to my surprise, he took mercy and gave me answers instead of grief.

“From what I heard, Eva thought she’d be the one to get me to propose. Her friend told me she already started picking out bridesmaids dresses, so yeah. She took it hard when I ended things.” He tilted his head. “You might’ve heard.”

“Yeah,” I said flatly. I didn’t read the tabloids that covered Mason’s sexcapades – mostly because I didn’t want to encourage Aaron’s bad habit of devouring them – but the news about Eva and Mason’s breakup had been absolutely everywhere. *“TECH PRINCESS VANDALIZES LEO GROUP OFFICE!”* The headline was emblazoned across every blog, paper and magazine, and Aaron and I had literally made a bag of popcorn to watch the viral footage when it came out. It was admittedly hilarious. The surveillance cameras at Mason’s Park Avenue office shot practically in HD, and they caught Eva with four friends breaking in just past 4AM. They all looked gorgeous in their mini skirts and stilettos as they trashed the entire floor, drawing dicks on the walls with lipstick and taking breaks only to wink up at the camera.

Mason never pressed charges, and last I checked the clip was nearing twenty million views.

“Yeah.” He pressed his mouth into a hard line, but I could see the laughter dancing behind his blue eyes. “So, my guess here is that Eva’s trying to get back at me now by marrying my brother – which sounds crazy to a normal person like you, but to someone who’s dated her, it’s just another day of the week.”

I was speechless, staring through tears at Mason in my miniscule kitchen. So it was real. Really happening. True love or not, Aaron had left me for a billionaire’s daughter and not only that they’d be wed in a matter of weeks. It was humiliating and to make things worse on me, my brain was repeating that pesky mantra that had been haunting the past two perfect years with Aaron. *You should have let it end when you had the chance. You could have avoided all this pain.*

“Fuck,” I breathed out hard, feeling worse now than I did on the day that he left me because on top of being heartbroken, I was livid. I never wanted to look at Aaron ever again, and at the same time, I was desperate to see him. I needed to ask a million questions to his face but most of all, I needed to know when his heart had grown so cold. When he had found the bravery to leave the woman he’d been to hell and back with – the woman he said he couldn’t wait to have children with.

Lastly, I wanted to know if he thought about how I’d be alone in bed every night, crying myself to sleep while he spent his evenings with Eva at the Tully estate in Silicon Valley, popping bottles of champagne three times the price of our rent.

The rent that was now solely mine to pay.

Double fuck.

And just like that, I burst into tears. *Damn it, Taylor,* I cursed myself because the only thing I hated more than feeling this emotionally out of control was Mason Leo, so ugly crying in front of him was most definitely a worst-case scenario on this lovely Wednesday morning. It didn’t help that as I cried, his expression refused to move let alone twitch with even an ounce of sympathy. A pathetic hiccup escaped my lips as Mason glanced at his cell phone.

“When you’re done, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

I swallowed and stared in disbelief. “You are so remarkably insensitive,” I breathed.

“I can’t imagine that’s new information for you.”

“It’s not, yet I keep letting you surprise me.”

“We Leo boys are full of surprises then, aren’t we?”

Fire lit my eyes as I burst from my chair. “Okay. You have to go now.” I tried to grip his arms, but my fingers failed to wrap around even half their muscle. *Goddamnit, Mase*. I knew he was smirking as he watched me struggle to remove him from my kitchen and apartment. When I finally got him to the door, he stopped to face me.

“I want you to come with me to that wedding, Taylor.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“If I am, it benefits you.”

“How?”

“Come with me and I’ll make your debt disappear.”

“Like I said, you’re out of your fucking mind,” I hissed, going for the door. But with a hard step forward Mason backed me up against it. My breath hitched in my throat as he hovered just over me, a dark look clouding over his face.

“Listen to me, Taylor,” he said, his voice steely. “I can’t let this marriage happen, and neither can you. Do you want Aaron to marry that woman? Do you want to turn on the TV next year and hear all about the two mil they dropped on a fucking baby shower? This is the kind of mistake that lasts forever.”

“I *know* that.”

“Then goddamnit, come with me.”

“*No*.”

He growled. “Why not?”

“*Because.”*

“Well now that you explained it.”

My lip curled. “Because you only want me there to lure him away from your ex, Mason.”

“And if that were the case?”

“Then that’s *fucked* up.” I tried to writhe away from Mason but in a second flat, his hands were on the door, his frame caging me in.

“How so?”

“You figure it out.”

“I’d prefer that tongue of yours enlighten me.”

Chest heaving, I stared up into his eyes, trying to find the words I knew he doubted I had in me. Wetting my lips, I finally regained composure. “You’re counting on me being weak, Mason,” I whispered, my voice shaky

but knife-sharp. “Aaron disappeared on me after three years without telling me why. He let me find out on my own that he was getting *married* to another woman, and on top of all that, he left me with a hell of a financial mess to deal with alone. So if you’re hoping for me to run back to him, then you’re basically banking on me to have a catastrophic lapse in judgment. You’re hoping I am *so* dumb I might still try to pursue a life with a man who ruined mine without thinking twice, well, sorry to break it to you, but I have a little more respect for myself that that.” I blew blonde locks from the eyes that burned so fiercely into his that he took a step back. “Enlightened yet?”

Mason blinked, stunned for half a second. But lifting his eyebrows, he recovered. “I’m definitely something,” he said. I shook my head and turned around so I didn’t have to watch him adjust his package.

“You’re also leaving now,” I muttered, unlocking the door and ignoring the heat of Mason’s body on my back. My heart beat faster when I felt him graze against my backside before sliding my hand off the knob to grab it himself.

“Alright,“ he conceded with a sudden ease. But in the hall, he held the door open for the last word. “Let me know when you change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

“You will,” he said with a nonchalance that drove me insane. “Feel free to call me when you do. And don’t be shy. Any time of the night works for me.”

My cheeks flushed red and I tried to retort, but with a dirty little wink, Mason was gone.

Chapter Three

I dragged my feet out of the empty break room with its fluorescent lights and broken vending machine. It was no paradise, but I still wished I could stay there instead of return to my dead Friday night shift, or my remarkably unpleasant coworkers. It'd been awhile since I'd dealt with cliques, but at McFadden's Ale House, there was a clique, and it hated me. Loathed me, really, because as I'd come to learn, they didn't take kindly to new meat at Faddy Ales. New meat meant a crowded tip pool, and a crowded tip pool meant less money for all.

Except me.

Thanks to Aaron, I was there to make whatever cash I could get, so I endured the mean girls because on good nights, they at least ignored me. Of course, on bad ones, they nitpicked my every move, called me "bitch" to my face and hip-checked me at service bar. It sucked but money was money, so I swallowed my pride and reminded myself that I hadn't come to make friends. In fact, McFadden's had remained my dirty little secret since I was hired because by day, I was an event coordinator for the esteemed Vandermark Restaurants on Fifth Ave, so I really didn't need anyone to know that by night, I was slinging lagers in a cropped sports jersey, Daisy Dukes and knee-high socks – at a bar known locally as "Shitty Hooters."

According to Yelp, the nickname derived from the wait staff's attitude, which was described as "aggressively apathetic." On a normal night, I couldn't argue that. But tonight, my coworkers seemed oddly impassioned about providing service – at least to some table that had arrived during my break. The second I got back to my shift, I saw my fellow waitresses burst into the back station, clamoring over their queen, Brielle, and the alleged babe at her table twenty-eight.

"I will *literally* give you fifty dollars if you let me serve him tonight, Bri."

"*I'll* give you half my tips and cover your Sunday."

"I'll give half my tips and cover your whole weekend!"

Damn. In the doorway, I watched in awe because on any other night, these were three of the greediest and pettiest girls in the world. I'd seen them argue for two hours over a six-dollar tip, so it was like a sad breath of fresh air to witness them offer everything short of their firstborn just to flirt

with a guy. But their efforts were in vain because Brielle declared, “Sorry, sluts!” before yanking her shirt down, grabbing the water pitcher and glaring at me. “Out of my way? Thanks,” she muttered, still hip-checking me on her way to the floor.

Awesome. Love this place, I snorted as I regained my footing and resisted the urge to follow my coworkers outside to watch. But my self-control lasted all of two seconds before I grabbed my tray and headed out to get myself a peek of Mr. Mystery Babe.

I really shouldn’t have been surprised when I saw it was Mason.

“How the hell?” I muttered under my breath as my coworkers glared at me for daring to stand near them.

“Out of our way? Thanks.” Arms hooked, they waltzed to stand right in front of me and within seconds, they were bouncing on their toes and squealing because across the bar, Brielle was breaking the rules by sliding seductively into the booth with Mason.

I bit my lip, shuffling aside for a better view of him. He was wearing the hell out of one of his usual suits – sleek, grey and fitted paired with a crisp white shirt underneath. Unlike a few days ago, his dark hair was neat and gently slicked back. He looked like the kind of rich and handsome that clearly didn’t belong in a place like Faddy Ales, and every woman in the room had taken notice. In fact, it felt like the entire place had stopped in its tracks to watch him, and I was hardly surprised because as always – the way Aaron hated – Mason commanded attention. It was precisely why my heart stopped when Brielle leaned into his whisper, biting back a big, flirty smile that slowly faded as her eyes lifted up to find me.

Oh boy.

And suddenly, Brielle sat up straight, rose to her feet and walked stiffly away from the table, directly blocking my view of Mason as she stomped with increasing fury at me. Dozens of stares flew in my direction as I stood there, just waiting to hear the words from my coworker that I could already predict.

“He asked for *you*,” Brielle muttered, face red and lip curling as she stormed right past me. Stunned but hardly surprised, I stared across the room at Mason. I shook my head at his thoroughly arched eyebrows, our eyes locking only after he took his time drinking me in from head to toe. *Goddamn this uniform,* I thought for the millionth time as I forced myself to march over to Mason in long, hard strides. I was humiliated but refused to

show it so when I finally reached him, I cocked my hip, held my tray up high and spoke before him.

"Don't."

He was already laughing. "What?"

"Crack all the predictable jokes. I know you're dying to, but let me do it for you. Yes, I work as a Faddy's girl. Yes, I'm wearing a padded bra under a child-sized Eagles jersey and yes, my pants are ridiculously tight."

"No judgment here. My own are getting tighter as we speak."

I rolled my eyes. "Right. So now that we've gotten the obligatory mention of your dick out of the way, can you please tell me how you even found me here?"

"There was a McFadden's paycheck on your kitchen counter," Mason said, prompting my groan. "And I was actually going to spare you the jokes. I'm sure you get enough grade-A material from your sophisticated clientele."

I glanced at the tables of overgrown frat boys – mostly finance bros who wore too much Axe and called me "dollface." "I do. Thanks."

"Of course. And since the reason isn't exactly jumping out at me here, care to tell me why you'd rather work at this dump than come with me to the wedding?"

"I'd rather work for a dump than a prick."

He studied the amusement on my face. "Charming. But you still essentially work for pricks when you're serving guys who tip ten percent and slap your ass while you're carrying a full tray."

I lifted my brows high. "The accuracy of that tells me you have personal experience with being a dick to waitresses."

"If observing Aaron at bars back in grad school counts as personal experience," Mason replied, watching my face fall like a brick at the mention of Aaron. "On the topic of that idiot, I wanted to clarify something from our conversation on Wednesday."

I glanced around for anyone trying to flag me down, but I had zero tables. With reluctance, I turned back to Mason. "Go for it."

He gave a short, admittedly sexy laugh as he rubbed his jaw. "Look, I know you're smarter than to run back to him, Taylor," he said, his voice so low and genuine I found myself suddenly disarmed. "And if you want the truth, I think you deserve better than him. But as much as I can't stand the kid, Aaron's my brother. I can't let him marry into crazy. He doesn't know

what he's getting into, and I'm not going to waste your time trying to explain it. I'm just hoping you'll realize that this plan would work in your favor too. Worst-case scenario, it falls through and he marries her. But you still get your shot at closure, and you still get to quit this place and wipe out all your debt at once. Doesn't sound too bad, does it?"

I clenched my jaw. *No.* It didn't sound bad. It sounded perfect and like everything I wanted and needed, but my body was still wired to resist. "No one would ever believe that you and I became a couple," I pointed out.

"No one would've ever believed that Aaron might marry Eva Tully, yet here we are," Mason countered easily. "Nothing is ever as far-fetched as you think. We'll just say I went to your house to tell you about the wedding. You were predictably distraught. I capitalized on your vulnerability and got you in bed."

My face contorted with disgust. "Ugh. That's horrible."

"It didn't actually happen, Taylor."

I rolled my eyes. "Thank you. For the clarification."

"No problem. Now go ahead and ask me whatever other questions you have to delay your decision to say yes." Mason kept his gaze pinned on me as he leaned back, loosening his skinny black tie. God, he was so arrogant I almost wanted to reject his offer and live in debt just to spite him.

"You know, I have a real job besides this one," I finally pointed out. "I assume you'll be wanting to go to St. Lucia well before the wedding so you have time to change Aaron's mind. But if you need me for more than a weekend, I won't be able to get the time off."

"I'm sure you can. Ideally, I'd want you off for two weeks."

"Are you serious?" I burst out laughing. "I can't get *two weeks* off, Mason. With barely any heads up and during high season? I'm not exaggerating when I say that's impossible."

Mason's chiseled features barely twitched in reaction. In fact, he looked bored with my reasoning as he turned his focus to adjusting his cufflinks. "It's not impossible. Your company has been angling for years to get one of their bars into The Victorian Hotel. I'm the majority owner of The Victorian Hotel and my contract with the restaurant group running our rooftop lounge expires next year. If I guarantee that space to Vandermark and require you as my exclusive liaison, they'll let you go on vacation for an entire month if you want."

I breathed out hard like his statement physically hit me in the chest. “You’re not honestly suggesting that you’ll use a multi-million dollar contract to bribe my company into granting me a two-week vacation.”

His cufflinks straight, Mason returned his attention to me. “That was exactly what I was suggesting but I’d be happy to reword it if you’re having trouble understanding. I imagine working at Faddy Ales does a number on the brain cells.”

I closed my eyes. “Oh my God. You are so incredibly annoying.”

“I know. You just gotta learn to love it, babe. That’s how good relationships last.”

Eyes open again, I stared at Mason, trying to figure out if he might actually be more infuriating than my toxic coworkers. But then right on cue, Brielle came by, hitting me first with a scowl and then her classic hip-check that sent me tripping with surprising force onto Mason’s table. The girl at the neighboring booth yelped, “Omigod!” as glasses toppled and I clenched my jaw.

Oh. My God.

I heard my coworkers’ ripping snorts behind me, and with my nose smashed in a puddle of ice water, I could actually feel my tolerance for bullshit quickly reaching capacity.

“What just – ?”

I brushed off Mason’s question before he could finish, wordlessly getting back on my feet and undoing my apron. Chucking it onto the table, I yanked out my ponytail, crossed my arms and locked eyes with Mason. “I won’t be just your dirty fling.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Come again?”

“If I go to the wedding as your date, Mason, I’m going to be seen as your girlfriend, not another cheap fling whose sole purpose is to get on her knees and service you whenever you think you’re horny. If you can manage to act like you have that kind of respect for a woman, then you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Mason blinked. “Done. Any other issues?”

“Minor concerns about how you’ll fake being a devoted boyfriend when you’ve never been one in real life.”

“I imagine the same way you’ll fake being a girlfriend who isn’t completely vanilla and devoid of passion.”

I glared. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Mason grinned. “Apparently that you can dish it but not take it.”

Once again, I closed my eyes for a moment to breathe deep.

“Alright, alright, truce,” he laughed. “Look, I know you hate me but let me just remind you that dealing with me for the next ten days will still be a hell of a lot easier than working at this shithole for at least another year. And if I ever say anything particularly annoying to you, just remember that giant fucking mountain of debt you’re erasing. Alright?”

I swallowed. “Fine.”

“Any last concerns?”

I tore the cheesy nametag off my breast. “None for now. Ready to go?”

Mason’s eyebrows shot up. “In the middle of your shift?”

“I’ve decided to make it the end,” I said, water still dripping from the tip of my nose as I glanced behind at my coworkers. They were watching from service bar with smirks for what a huffy mess I looked like. From where they stood, my conversation with Mason looked like an embarrassing disaster – which technically, it was, but I was still eager to turn their smug looks into that of open-mouthed shock. Looking back to him, I crossed my arms. “It’s your first task as my boyfriend, Mase. Walk me out of here like the gentleman you aren’t and make yourself look convincingly like my loving boyfriend.”

His eyebrows still hitched, he grinned. “You got it, babe.”

And just like that, Mason was up. A hush had fallen over the room, but he was nonchalant, straightening his suit and looking like some kind of royal as he escorted me off with a hand on my back. He smirked when I stiffened at his touch. Despite an outward calm, my heart had never beat faster in my life. *This is actually happening,* I had to remind myself as Mason guided me to the front, pulling me protectively against his body as we parted the sea of gaping eyes. *Nice touch,* I smirked to myself, feeling bolder now as we approached the bar.

Like everyone else, the other waitresses were flat-out gaping, so as I passed their clique, I hit them with a version of the snarky line they always sneered at me.

“Tell them I quit?” I wiggled my fingers in a wave. “Thanks.”

Ho-ly shit.

It wasn’t closure just yet, but it was a start.

Chapter Four

Apparently, the first order of business between Mason and myself was a meeting at his office to go over “basics.” From what I gathered during our conversation, we were about to map out a syllabus called “Pissing Off Aaron 101,” and I was very much on board with that, along with the fact that Mason called a luxury sedan to pick me up at my apartment and bring me to The Leo Group.

The offices were located on Park Avenue, at the top of the iconic Tate Building. The commercial tower was home to Manhattan’s most famous companies, and everything from four-star restaurants to esteemed news studios, so the entrance was ever the revolving door of very busy and important people. I couldn’t help but feel completely out of place as I strolled through in my jeans and reliably warm but admittedly hideous down jacket, armed with the sole purpose of trash talking my ex.

Surprisingly alone in the elevator, I tapped my heels anxiously up to his office on the forty-third floor, my eyebrows arching when the doors opened to a spacious waiting area flanked by two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows. To my relief, it appeared to be a busy day, so I went mostly unnoticed as I made my way to the sleek, black surface at reception. The ultra-focused woman behind it angled her face to me, greeting me first with a smile before her eyes slid away from her screen. “Good afternoon. Can I help you?”

I spoke over the sounds of her typing a mile a minute. “Yes, please, I’m here to see Mason Leo.”

“Name?”

“Taylor Simms.”

She frowned at her screen. “I’m sorry, it looks like you missed your appointment.”

“My appointment?”

“I have your appointment here as two-thirty and it’s nearing three now, so I’m afraid I can’t fit you in. Mr. Leo’s schedule is especially tight as he’ll be out of town next week.”

“Oh.” I paused then laughed at myself, embarrassed by the line I was about to use. “He… asked me to come. I’m actually his, um…”

“Girlfriend?” The pity in her tone had me quickly realizing how many women came to reception and claimed to be Mason’s girlfriend. At the end of the desk, a young man and older woman exchanged knowing looks and suddenly, I realized I looked like an idiot. *Damn it, Mason, you asshole*. Grabbing my phone, I shot him a text.

Hi. Your receptionist thinks I’m a lying groupie. Come get me.

I sent the text, but it took till after being asked to “please step aside” for Mason to finally came to my halfhearted rescue. I had hoped he’d come outside and grandly claim me as his beloved girlfriend but instead, he called and I simply watched as the receptionist picked up, blinked with brief surprise then hung up. On the bright side, it was like a magic trick watching her look of apathy transform into a warm smile for me.

“Miss Simms, I’d be happy to show you to Mr. Leo’s office.”

Great, I grumbled inwardly, though as icy as she was, I couldn’t hold my grudge against her as I trailed her down a sundrenched hall toward the office at the very end. She was only doing her job. Mason, however, was an asshole for leading on however many women he did, forcing the poor souls at the front desk to be dubious of anybody coming in and presenting herself as his girlfriend.

“This is clearly going to be a new experience for you,” I said to Mason once I made it into his office, the door shutting behind me. He sat at his glass desk in a dark suit, the jacket unbuttoned over a crisp white shirt and grey tie. Setting his pen down, he leaned back in his leather chair and cocked an eyebrow.

“What is?”

“Acting like you’re in a committed relationship. First off, would’ve been nice for you to come rescue your girlfriend in person. Second, we’ve barely started this little arrangement and I’ve already been reminded of what an unlikely, womanizing choice of a boyfriend you’d be for me.”

Mason set his work aside, looking utterly unfazed by my words. “Well, that’s precisely why we’re having this meeting.” He gestured for me to take the seat across from him. Sinking into the leather chair, I shrugged off my coat, brushing away the feathers it left on my pants and feeling severely underdressed despite being in just an office.

“What are we covering then? I’m guessing if you want to look like a good boyfriend, you should know things like my favorite food and restaurants. Probably my favorite movies, shows on TV.”

“I’m already well versed on the reality trash you fall asleep to, but that’s not the information I’m looking for anyway.”

My arms crossed over my chest. “Fine. What is it then?”

“Slightly more personal details – namely things Aaron always wanted from you but never got.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re talking about sexual positions.”

Mason laughed. “You’re not too far off.” He seemed to take pleasure in the horror that struck on my face. “Realistically, once Aaron sees us together, he’s going to challenge the idea of us as a couple. He’s going to watch us closely and ask a million questions so for the sake of firing him up, I want to find out what would kill him to know that you provide me. Preferably things he didn’t get. Home cooked dinners, massages. Stripteases. Specific positions in bed.”

“I sat down two minutes ago. I can’t believe you’re already asking me to tell you details about my bedroom with Aaron. And before you make a joke about how I live in a shitty studio, you know what I mean.”

Mason leaned forward with a slight crinkle in his long, straight nose. “Trust me, I don’t want to hear the details of your sex life with my brother. But the point of us being a couple for this wedding is to make Aaron jealous – to piss him off to high hell and drive him fucking insane over the fact that you’re not only with me but showing me things he never got to see. Right now, he thinks he’s seen everything from you. Our job is to convince him that he hasn’t and still wants you.”

I groaned, hating the fact that Mason had a point. Glaring out the window at the view of the Chrysler building, I avoided his eye, loathing the fact that I had to relive my failed relationship for him. “I don’t know, Mason. As far as I know, I was a decent girlfriend. I gave Aaron massages every night. We had sex at least four times a week and I’ve done everything from put on a corset and garters for him to let him tie me to the bed,” I said, my cheeks hot. They grew even hotter when I looked up to find Mason’s eyebrows lifted in unfiltered surprise at me. Blushing fiercely, I managed to roll my eyes. “Yeah, I know you have me in your head as this prudish little good girl, but I can confidently say I didn’t leave Aaron wanting for much in bed. If anything, he just wished I’d let him show me off more and act more flirty and sexual with him in public.”

“But you’re more on the conservative side,” Mason deduced.

“Actually, no,” I said defensively. “I’m not Miss Prim and Proper, I just liked being privately sexy with my boyfriend, as in I like sending nude photos and teasing him at home and trying different things in bed. What I *didn’t* like, however, was encouraging Aaron’s need to show off and swing his dick around like an idiot. I’m not sure if you noticed, but growing up with you gave him an unhealthy need to show the world that he had nice things too and as his girlfriend, it was kind of exhausting. It turned me off getting too dolled up and wearing tight, sexy dresses and getting him all the attention he so desperately craved because I didn’t want him to put so much worth in the superficial.”

Breathless, I finished my speech to find Mason wetting his smirking lips in a way that made me press my knees together. “In short, you didn’t want him to try to be like me,” he said.

“Precisely. I wanted him to be nothing like you. And you’re laughing because?”

“Because this works perfectly for our purposes and you’re too busy being pissed at me to realize it,” Mason replied with amusement. “We’re trying to get Aaron jealous and you’re telling me he used to wish for you to wear little dresses and show PDA so he could compete with my dating life. So basically, to get at Aaron’s biggest insecurities, we just need to buy you a new wardrobe and you just need to muster up the courage to let me touch you at some point.”

I chewed my lip, realizing that again, Mason had a point. Aaron had already grown up furiously jealous of Mason. Seeing Mason show me off and nuzzle me in public would probably drive him mentally insane. And as much as instinct told me to hurt for Aaron and protect him, I found myself wanting to do this. I wanted to get closure and answers from him, yes, but I also wanted badly to make him feel at least a shred of what I felt. I just needed to reconcile the fact that I couldn’t do it without cozying up to his asshole brother.

“Sound like a plan?” Mason asked. “We’ll set up an appointment for your fitting tomorrow.”

I tried not to look too excited by the prospect of brand new clothes. “I’ll be free.”

“Good. In the meantime, we may need to practice some public displays of affection.”

I stared. “What is this, middle school and we’re going to practice making out?”

There was laughter in Mason’s eyes as he studied my reluctance. “Not quite but the reality is that at some point, my lips are going to have to touch yours.”

“Is that an absolute necessity?” I asked weakly, involuntarily gazing at Mason’s curving mouth.

“Considering you used to kiss Aaron in public, I’d say yes. But since you look physically nauseous at the idea right now, I’ll let you take it a step a time.” Mason walked me to the door. “I’m sure the monotony of dating my brother for three years has wiped out any memory of how to flirt or look remotely sensual, so I’ll give you some time to recover from that.”

“If this is your attempt at reverse psychology, it’s not working.”

Mason laughed. “No? What if I challenged the idea that you even remembered how to look content? How to mimic the mannerisms and speech patterns of someone in a passionate and loving relationships?”

“I’d say you have nothing to worry about, boyfriend.”

“‘Boyfriend.’ Great pet name. I’d prefer ‘babe’ or even ‘honey’ over it, but work at your own pace. We’ll get you there,” Mason smirked as he opened the door. But his thick brows furrowed as I pulled my coat back on. “Christ. Leave it off for now.”

“Excuse me?”

“At least let me watch you walk away without that hideous thing on,” Mason said, picking a feather out of the sleeve and then letting his gaze dip briefly down the front of my V-neck. I stood frozen for a moment but then he cracked a half smile. “Basic flirting. Try it on me next time.”

I snorted. “Screw you.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Taylor.”

“Dying with excitement here.”

And with that romantic exchange, we parted ways.

Chapter Five

The first official act of our staged romance started the next day at the Margot Vivier showroom on Madison Avenue. Mason had texted me to meet him but was MIA by the time I arrived, giving me plenty of time to stand there awkwardly and confirm that this was in fact the kind of place I'd never explore on my own. It was almost uncomfortably immaculate with its runway lighting and perfectly spaced racks of insanely expensive-looking dresses. Though I liked to think of myself as mostly confident, I found myself feeling quickly out of my league.

But just as I contemplated backing slowly out of the store, a willowy salesgirl fluttered forward to greet me by name, whisking me into the back and chatting warmly about all the "stunning" pieces "Mr. Leo" already picked for me before flitting around me like a hummingbird, wrapping my bust, waist and hips with her thin, white measuring tape. Jotting the numbers into a leather booklet, she then poured a glass of champagne and handed it to me with a dazzling smile, leaving me half-stunned, half-delighted as I sipped on Veuve and browsed their selection of summer dresses – all of them plucked out specifically for me.

I was about a half hour into my tipsy shopping when Mason's text buzzed in my phone.

Not sure I'll make it. Work. But feel free to go crazy. Everything will be charged to my account.

I wrinkled my nose, trying but failing to contain my snarky reply.

ME: You have an account here. Classy.
MASON: What's the problem
ME: None.
ME: Just realizing the sheer volume of women you've brought into this store.
MASON: If you're not feeling special enough right now let me comfort you with the fact that you're the only one who will be receiving actual clothing rather than just lingerie
ME: Mm. Even classier.
MASON: That said you could probably use some lingerie despite your full supply of incredibly sexy day of the week panties

I narrowed my eyes at Mason's last text. Sipping my champagne, I stared at my phone for another minute before deciding I wouldn't reply – because I was classy, not because I had no comebacks left in my arsenal.

"Miss Simms," the salesgirl smiled warmly as she glided over. "Your fitting room is ready."

With that, she escorted me to a white, circular room lit by the glow of a chandelier hanging over a white, circular couch. With a gesture toward the button to press if I needed help, she shut the door behind me, leaving me alone with about a dozen dresses that could probably pay my rent four times over. There was silk, jersey and charmeuse in shades of coral, jade and champagne – and all it took was two seconds of running my hands all over the buttery fabrics before I was eagerly stripping naked and pulling on the first piece. I couldn't even be mad at Mason for picking the tightest, shortest little things to offer because the mission *was* to find The One – that one painfully sexy dress to incite Aaron's emotion, envy and regret all at once.

While the first three or four choices were gorgeous, flattering and certainly summer appropriate, I'd yet to feel that spark. But then sifting through the pieces left, my fingers brushed along a silk so soft and luxurious my lips actually puckered into an involuntary "*ooh*." But just as I slipped the potential winner off its sleek, black hanger, my phone buzzed on the chair.

MASON: What are you wearing right now?
ME: Ha.
MASON: I'm not sexting you. It's a serious question since I can't see you in person
ME: Well I was about to try on something promising but then you interrupted
MASON: Are you telling me you're naked right now?
ME: I'm wearing underwear. Are you sure you're not trying to sext me?
MASON: Having doubts now. What color are your panties?
ME: This is 100% sexting.
MASON: Let me guess – they say Friday despite the fact that it's Sunday
ME: I'm not wearing day of the week panties, asshole. They're black lace boy shorts

MASON: Fuck.

I snorted, ready to toss the phone aside after a good minute of silence. But just as I set it down, another text buzzed in.

MASON: Send me a picture
ME: You're not seriously requesting nudes from me right now.
MASON: I was asking for a picture of the dress you were about to try on but I'd be more than receptive to nudes if you wanted to send some. You certainly have me thinking about them at this point.
ME: Ha. Weren't you supposed to be swamped with work?
MASON: Distracted now
ME: Ugh why
MASON: Vivid imagination
ME: Ok I'm turning off my phone now.

I laughed as I tossed my phone into my purse before returning to my artful shimmy into the tightest but most beautiful dress ever made.

"And… we have a winner," I murmured when I could finally gaze at myself in the mirror. The dress was as simple as it could get – draped and strapless with a sweetheart neckline. But there was something ruthlessly sexy about it too. It had to be the color – nude and barely a shade darker than the natural hue of my skin. Combined with the snug fit that forced me to go without so much as my thong underneath, I easily declared it the winning make-him-kick-himself-in-the-ass St. Lucia showstopper.

All I needed was to zip the back.

After pushing the button several times to no avail, I hugged the front of my dress to my chest and peeked out of the changing room, taking a few barefoot steps onto the plush carpet before a familiar voice gasped behind me.

"*No* way. Taylor Simms?"

Fuck.

Please don't let it be her, I begged silently, my stomach dropping before I even turned around to confirm the sight of Whitney Decker.

"Oh my God, it *is* you!" she squealed, her dark curls bouncing as she pranced over to me in just a black bra and leather skirt. Wrapping her arms

around my neck, she kissed my cheek and cooed, “Poor *thing*, Taylor. I’m surprised you’re even out and about after what Aaron did to you!”

And there it was. The passive aggressiveness she was so very famous for.

“Well. You know.” A strained smile stretched my lips. “It’s been two months. Can’t be sad the rest of my life.”

“Oh, that is such a good attitude, darling. You seriously have the *best* attitude,” Whitney marveled, pulling away to flash me big Bambi eyes. “God, Tay, I was really hoping I wouldn’t have to tell you but now that you’ve seen me here, you probably know I’m shopping to go to Aaron’s wedding.”

It was my turn for the Bambi eyes.

Fuck.

Seriously, Aaron? He didn’t have the decency to tell me he was getting married but he *did* invite the woman who’d almost come between us two years ago – who reminded me of the worst night of my life, the worst decision of my life and all the pain that followed after. Blinking hard, I gathered myself, refusing to give Whitney the pleasure of my rattled expression.

“Oh, that’s… fine, Whitney,” I said, my throat tight.

“No. It’s so not. And I can tell you don’t mean that,” she sighed, exaggerating a frown. But I could see the ends of her lips quivering with amusement as she soaked in my thinly veiled fury. “It’s just I’ve always had such a bond with Aaron. We were *so* close. You know that,” she pouted, using that baby voice I’d heard so many times before – on the phone during those nights when she’d call Aaron at one, two, even three in the morning. “Work stuff,” Aaron always said. But then that shitstorm of a night happened. The one I’d rather not think about again.

Especially now.

Swallowing hard, I found my words and gave Whitney a shrug. “It’s your life, Whitney. Do whatever you want. You always have.”

“*Ooh*,” she gasped, her dark eyes gleaming. “Are we getting catty yet?”

I made a face. “Is that what you were hoping for?”

“Well, you know. You’ve always been all prim, proper and prudish. It’d be nice to see you get a little nasty for once,” she giggled, biting her lip. “God knows you’ll need to offer the boys *some*thing to get back into the dating game.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

Whitney feigned a nervous laugh. “Did I hit a nerve? Oh, Tay, don’t be sad. You’ll rebound eventually.” She puckered her glossy lips. “Probably not with anyone as cute as Aaron, but hey – you were kind of dating up with him to begin with.”

Wow. *You have got to be kidding me.* With a laugh of sheer disbelief, I shook my head at Whitney, refusing to engage any further. Turning around, I looked desperately for the salesgirl. When I caught her passing the hallway, I quickly flagged her down, breathing out in relief as she flurried over to zip my dress. I thanked her quietly, facing decidedly away from Whitney who still stood there with a big, fake smile on her lips. It only spread wider as the salesgirl struggled to zip my dress.

“Excuse her. Tay’s been digging into those post-breakup Oreos, if you know what I mean.” Whitney winked at the poor salesgirl who frowned deeply at her before flashing me a look of shock mixed with apology. It helped. Kind of. But before I could even recover from the first insult, Whitney hit me again. “Don’t sweat the dress, Tay. Bit too sexy for you to pull off, anyway,” she said, tossing another wink my way. And with that, she waltzed back into her dressing room.

After reassuring the salesgirl that I was done trying things on, I skulked back into mine. Shutting the door, I plopped down in the tufted white chair and stared at the wall, willing myself not to indulge in all the dark thoughts that Whitney never failed to trigger. It was dangerous to sink into that place in my mind because it was filled with nothing but what-ifs and regret – all the pain I could have avoided if I could just get that one week, maybe just that one night of my life back. Even before Aaron left, the thoughts plagued me. Now that he was gone, they haunted me, choosing random times of the day to flash behind my eyes and bounce wildly around in my head, reminding me of everything I lost before I lost even Aaron.

Okay, stop, Taylor. Breathe, I scolded myself, squeezing my eyes shut. *Think happy thoughts, happy thoughts, happy –*

“*Omigod!”*

My eyes fluttered, Whitney’s squealing voice snapping me out of my daze.

“Oh. My. *God*,” she continued with her signature exaggeration. “How did I get so lucky? And more importantly, what are you *doing* here?”

I blinked again but when I heard the rich voice that answered her question, my hand flew to my mouth.

"I don't know. What are you doing here?" Mason countered teasingly, his audible smirk telling me that her arms were already wrapped tightly around him. *Holy shit, Mase, yes.* Still clutching the front of my dress to my chest, I stood eagerly at the door, my negative thoughts fading fast as I realized what kind of sick, twisted fun I could have with the scene unfolding outside.

"Oh, you know, Mase. Just shopping for dresses so I can go to your brother's wedding to your *ex*. Scandalous, by the way, but I love how you clearly don't give a rat's ass," Whitney giggled. I clenched my jaw as I heard her smack Mason somewhere on his body. It sounded hard. Probably his chest. "Fun to be the hotter, richer one, huh? You can just watch lil' bro marry your girl and let that shit roll off your back 'cause you can *always* get someone hotter."

"You're not wrong about that."

Whitney purred and lowered her voice. "Hotter with better tits *and* new tricks in bed." Holy shit. She was really going for it. "Seen anyone lately who might fit that bill? Someone… in this *store*, perhaps? Standing very close to you?"

Mason's voice returned with a smooth laugh just as a text buzzed in my phone. Grabbing it out of my purse, I heard him say, "Actually, yes," just as I read the message on my phone.

Wherever the hell you are please come to the dressing rooms and save me.

I clamped my hand over my mouth to suppress my giant snort. My pulse picking up, I took in a deep breath, mentally switching gears and getting ready to put on the performance of a lifetime. Fluffing my hair, I exhaled steadily and finally swung open the door.

The satisfaction was instant as I locked eyes on Mason and his unblinking stare.

In less than a second, it found me, fixed on me, and refused to let go, moving greedily up the length of my legs before tracing the flare of my hips and the dip of my waist. I couldn't even suppress the satisfaction spreading my lips as I watched the notorious Mason Leo try but fail several times to simply *say* something.

“Christ, Taylor,” he finally muttered, dragging his hand across his jaw and studying me, looking so convincingly tortured I had to chew my giant grin back. Eyeing Whitney, I found her simply standing there, mouth parted and eyes narrowed but unblinking, her attention flicking back and forth between us till she noticed my smile. A scowl formed quickly.

“Are you… here together or something?” she asked begrudgingly.

I flashed a placid smile. “Mm-hm,” I said before turning my exaggerated doe eyes to Mason. “Think I should buy this – *babe?*”

He ignored my act to continue staring at me. “I think you know the answer to that,” he said, something oddly tantalizingly about how his voice sounded hard and for once humorless. Wetting his lips, Mason tilted his head just so. “Can you turn for me?” he asked softly – and so politely I practically forgot where I was. But I came right back to Earth when Whitney jumped at her chance to cut in.

“It won’t even *zip* on her,” she blurted. But then her lashes fluttered when Mason looked at her and she gave a breathy giggle to remind him of her daintiness. Though he blinked at her for a second, Mason quickly returned his attention to me, drawing closer till there was barely six inches of space between us. I barely had to fake my reaction when his crooked smirk spread into a grin, mischief flickering in his blue eyes as he murmured low but loud enough for Whitney to hear.

“Turn around for me, baby.”

His words sent a quick ripple of chills up my arms, but shaking my head at him, I gave a little laugh. “Baby,” I whispered mockingly before gathering my hair over my shoulder and turning around. Gripping the edge of the doorframe, I looked into my dressing room mirror, watching through the reflection as Mason positioned himself behind me. God, the man was tall. Shameless too, with the way he cocked his head to drag his heavy gaze up the length of my naked backside. I was so ready to say something smart, but suddenly he shut me up, yanking my dress tight, grabbing my zipper and somehow pulling it up with barely any effort at all. A tiny gasp parted my lips but once he let go, I breathed and realized despite its tightness, the dress fit me perfectly.

And judging from the way Mason was looking at me in it, it was the one.

“Um.” Whitney searched for something disruptive to say but came up short. She had to be a masochist, continuing to stand there as Mason locked

his eyes on mine through the reflection of the mirror and shook his head. Rubbing the back of his neck, he groaned.

"Yeah, let's get you home so I can fucking rip this thing off put my hands all over you."

My eyebrows shot up. *Well then*. "Funny you should say that," I smiled, my fingertips absently tracing the curve of my sweetheart neckline. "Because Whitney actually said it was too sexy for me to pull off."

Mason raised his eyebrows, glanced at Whitney's beet red mortification and then returned those blue eyes to me. "I'm sure what she meant was that it's too sexy for me not to pull off of you. Now for Christ's sake, get changed so I can take you home and throw you on my fucking bed."

God, yes. A-fucking-plus, Mason.

With that bit of filth, Whitney finally stalked right back into her dressing room. Hand over my mouth, I recouped, reveling in what just happened and letting myself giggle under my breath as I turned to face Mason. "Well done," I mouthed, arms crossed with content as I leaned back against the wall, listening to Whitney hastily gather her things and zip up her coat before marching straight out of the dressing area in a huff, without so much as a look in either of our directions. Wearing that crooked grin on his lips, Mason waited till she was out of the store to respond.

"Not sure what you're referring to."

"'Let's go home'?" I smirked. "Like we live together."

"Well that half of the sentence was certainly a lie," he said.

I paused for a moment. "Mm." I wiggled my lips to the side, deciding not to acknowledge his suggestion that the latter half of his sentence was true. If Mason genuinely wanted to rip my dress off, I genuinely didn't want to know. I had no place in my head for that kind of information. Arms still crossed, I changed the subject. "So, is this the part where you charge all this stuff to your account?" I asked lamely.

"Do you have everything you need for St. Lucia?"

"If I buy all the dresses I tried on today, I have more than enough."

Mason cocked an eyebrow. "Swimwear?"

"I have swimsuits at home."

"The point is to get new things Aaron's never seen before," Mason said, his eyes skimming the sweetheart neck of my dress. He laughed when I played with my hair to block his view of my cleavage. "This isn't an attempt to con my way into watching you get naked and try on bikinis,

Taylor. I just want you to get my brother's attention because that's the plan. If you want privacy, I can easily leave again. I do have a lot of work to do at the office."

I blushed despite myself. "That's not it," I lied, suddenly confused and not at all sure why. "I just don't want you spending any more money here. I can get good bikinis that don't cost four hundred dollars a piece, okay?" I laughed. "I'll just have Sofia take me somewhere. She's the queen of shopping for this kind of stuff."

Mason let his gaze linger on me for a second before saying, "Okay." Unless I imagined it, there was a hint of knowing smugness in his smile before he turned to walk away and find the salesgirl. Once he was out of sight, I groaned inwardly, raking my hand through my hair and trying to figure out what was weird about our conversation just now. But I couldn't. The weirdness just hung in the air, leaving me feeling vaguely unsettled despite the fact that I'd just recorded a hands-down win against Whitney Frickin' Decker.

As Mason paid for my things, I stayed in the fitting room with the salesgirl, who helped me out of my dress. She was quiet as she unzipped me and slipped all my new dresses into black garment bags, but once she was done and I was back to my usual sweater and jeans, she dared to flash a sly look. "This is our first time seeing Mr. Leo in the store," she said quietly. "He never actually comes in to shop, so… you must be a special one."

I laughed. "A special case, that's for sure."

"Well, whatever it is, he's… *very* handsome. So it must be fun," she whispered as she walked me out toward Mason, who waiting for me at the counter, his black pea coat on again and its sharp collar turned up to skim his jaw. He was on the phone with the office so I took the moment to study him without his knowing, realizing that – *ugh*. Even if I didn't say it aloud, I did have to admit it to just myself: So far, faking it with Mason was actually kind of fun.

Chapter Six

Monday lunch with Sofia was a necessity for both of us, and it started with her confessing three things: one, that she already knew about my "new fling," two, that she shamelessly approved, and three, she too would be attending Aaron's wedding to Eva.

"I'm sorry, Taylor! I swear to God I was torturing myself trying to figure out how to tell you, and I promise I'm still going to punch him in the mouth when I see him, even if it's on the day of his wedding and then I have to do his fucking makeup after to cover it up," she rambled and cringed at once, her fingers thrust in her copper hair. "I just had to go because my family was pressuring me to so I could get the scoop on what the hell Aaron's even thinking. And my agency would kill me if I said no to that… sweet, *sweet*, Tully money."

I burst out laughing. "Hey, someone needs to do the bride's makeup. And money is money, so I get it," I said truthfully, reaching across our Benedicts to give her hand a reassuring squeeze.

I couldn't stay mad at the girl. Sofia Ricardi was the youngest cousin of the Leo brothers and my best friend since I started dating Aaron three years ago. While Aaron and Sofia had always been close, our bond quickly surpassed theirs the moment we met, which started with me breathing, "Your eyebrows are *perfect*." The second Sofia revealed she did makeup for a living, my girly side awakened with the giggly force of a thousand rainbows, and since then, we'd been practically sisters. In fact, she was the sole reason I even survived the weeks after Aaron left. Aside from swearing to cause him physical harm upon their next meeting, she brought me wine and dinner several days a week, even wrapping my couch with a fitted sheet and comforter when I insisted on sleeping there instead of the bed.

Despite Mason's insistence, I honestly couldn't imagine keeping our fake relationship a secret from Sofia. But the task became a little easier when I heard she'd be coming with us to St. Lucia. The idea of everyone watching Mason and me act like a loving new couple was daunting enough, so I definitely didn't need Sofia constantly peering at me and giggling about how *convincing* I was, teasing me about how I *totally* had a crush on Mason or whatever. It was actually simpler to let the crush ship sail and just pretend we were real.

Plus, it meant I could just go ahead and talk about how hot things got at the store yesterday.

I had to tell the story. It was an undeniably good one and I would be lying if I said I wasn't at least a teensy bit turned on by the filth that came out of Mason's mouth when he saw me in that dress. I just reasoned that at least half the tingly thrill came from the fact that we'd teamed up to knock Whitney down several pegs, so it wasn't anything to be worried about. It was just a fun little act. Besides, there was no woman in the world who wouldn't be somewhat to completely titillated by the idea of Mason Leo wanting to tear her clothes off. So that was my defense.

Sofia was giving me a hard time about it though.

"Ew, can you stop?"

"What?"

"I can tell you're thinking about Mason right now and trust me, I'm used to sex conversations with you that involve one of my cousins, but I don't know if I can handle the way you're squirming right now."

"You're exaggerating."

"I'm not. I've definitely never seen you relive a memory so good that you started making sex faces right in public."

"Sof! Gross."

"You're telling me! I'm the one who has to look at this shit," she said with a dramatic shudder. "But it's fine. Now I know to tell the resort to put me in a room *way* down the hall from you and Mase. I should probably tell them to order a couple extra headboards while I'm at it."

My cheeks burned. "Okay, let's… please never talk about the prospect of me and Mason having sex," I said, failing to recognize my slip-up till Sofia made a funny face at me.

"Uh… why? You're dating Mason now. Sex is going to happen," she pointed out blankly. *Oops. Shit.* "I mean do you really feel *that* guilty about being with him?"

I blinked. "Yes," I said eagerly. "Yes, I do."

"Well, don't. Aaron basically gave you the freedom to do whatever you want with the stunt he pulled and that *includes* boinking his brother, so boink away. And while we're on this topic, can I just say that I'm ridiculously happy for you two? As fucked up as it is, I kind of always hoped… even when you were still with Aaron… that you and Mase might become a thing someday."

I had to laugh in her face. “Wait, what? *Why?*”

“Because under all the hate, I feel like you guys were totally meant for each other!” she said, arms crossed with her nose in the air.

“Yeah, the few times we even spoke, it was all snark so now you’re just talking out of your ass.”

“Hey, there’s a fine line between love and hate,” Sofia sassed. “You should know better than anyone considering how weird things got with you and Aaron before he even left.”

I blinked, stunned. Then I shot her a look. “We were fine, Sofia. Perfect, really, considering the circumstances.”

She backed down fast. “Sorry. You’re right.”

“So let’s please not go there.”

She held her hands up. “Again, sorry. We won’t go there.”

I pinched my eyes shut, regretting the snippiness. “No... I’m sorry. I was just already sensitive and thinking about that whole situation thanks to the little Whitney flare-up yesterday.”

“Don’t think about those things. Or that night,” Sofia urged. “You have a new man in your life and there’s no room for regrets anymore. You’re happy, he’s happy and honestly… I think you could be the one. The one to tame the untamable beast.”

“Sof, you’re great at many things but I gotta say, you’re not the best bullshitter.”

She scoffed. “Fine. Don’t believe me. But let me just point out that Mason’s already dropped basically *millions* of dollars on you by negotiating that deal with your company so you could go on vacation. And let’s be real, he didn’t have to do that. He could’ve just booked some big party with you guys that cost like, a *fraction* of that contract and Lori would still let you go on vacation since you’re her favorite employee anyway. Right?”

I chewed my lip. “That reminds me, I have to drop by the office to sign something so I can even start my vacation.”

“Or are you just trying to escape me because you’re uncomfortable admitting how incredibly fucking attracted you are to Mason?” Sofia smirked. I narrowed playful eyes at her.

“That’s not it, and you’re very annoying. You know that?”

“In the most lovable way though, right?” Sofia grinned as I faked a sigh and a begrudging nod. “See, that’s a trait that runs in the Leo family. And you know that all too well now that you’re with Mason.”

I groaned. “I really do.”

“Oop. There’s the sex face again.”

I clamped my hand over my mouth. “Liar,” I said, leaving money on the table that she threw back me. “You’re the worst.”

“And you’re leaving. Don’t try to pay. See you at Noah’s dinner tomorrow?”

“You will.” Opening this week was Lady Mercer, SoHo’s latest scene to be seen, and running the place was Noah van Daal, Manhattan’s favorite bad boy chef and best friend to none other than my own Mason Leo. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Of course not. Everyone in this city is going to be there.” Sofia wiggled her perfect eyebrows. “So it’s basically you and Mason’s official coming out party, wouldn’t you say?”

Shit, I thought as I shrugged my coat on, realizing exactly why Mason had asked me to go. “God, I hadn’t really thought about that but thank you for reminding me it’s gonna be Side-Eye City in there.”

“You better look hot. It’s Noah’s opening, but all eyes are gonna be on you two.”

“Thanks. No pressure at all.”

Sofia snorted. “You’ll be fine. You’re going to have Mason Leo on your arm and I hear that’s a big enough confidence boost as it is.”

“That I actually can’t argue.”

“Mm-hm. And if you get nervous, just pretend that everything’s gravy and you two couldn’t be more in love,” Sofia beamed. “Don’t let the haters in on the truth. Know what I mean?”

“Oh, trust me,” I laughed as I leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. “I know it all too well. See you tomorrow.”

* * *

“Taylor, you didn’t have to come in to sign this in person. I did state in the email that an electronic signature would do,” Lori said as she closed the door of her corner office overlooking Fifth Avenue. As usual, my boss’s space was an amusing contradiction – neat, streamlined and tidy besides the island of madness that was her desk. “I’m glad you did come in though, because I did want to commend you in person on facilitating the deal between Vandermark and The Victorian. It’s going to solidify our

company's reputation among luxury hotels." Lori adjusted her chignon as she sat behind her desk. "And, of course, I need to congratulate you on whatever deal you have going with Mason Leo."

Standing awkwardly in front of her desk, I laughed. "Excuse me?"

Lori snorted. "You've been with this company since you were nineteen, Taylor. I've known you for longer than even Aaron has, so I know that you're not actually dating Mason Leo. Might I remind you that I'm the one you came running to every time you needed to complain about him?"

True. My top two choices for receiving Mason rants were Aaron and Sofia, but since they were both related to him, I generally suppressed my anger till I could bring it to Lori – which always made Mondays extra Monday-like for her. I grinned and grimaced at the same time. "Can you keep a secret?"

"I can. As long as you email me the second you break and have drunk beach sex with him."

"Wow. Thank you for the vote of confidence, but that's not going to happen."

"Why not? After everything Aaron put you through, I'd say you deserve to actually sleep with his brother. I mean, Aaron was cute but with Mason, you've got those shoulders and that *ass*. And it's purely physical, so who cares? Just tape his smart mouth shut before you get into bed with him. Simple solutions," Lori said. Looking up, she snorted at my horrified expression. "What? You're already doing something batshit insane. You might as well have fun while you're at it. It's not like you're ever going to see him again after you come back from the wedding."

I frowned. "I hadn't thought about that. And I guess you have a point, I just… would rather not complicate things."

"That suggests you even have a history to complicate. Which you don't." Lori cocked her head as she moved a stack of papers. "Right?"

I blinked. "Right."

"So go crazy. You're not in St. Lucia yet but thanks to the pile of last minute paperwork your new boyfriend had me finalize over the weekend, you *are* technically on vacation," she pointed out. "And considering all the work *I* put in for you thus far, if you don't come back from St. Lucia with a detailed description of what Mason Leo looks like ass naked, I'm firing you."

“If it helps, I may or may not have seen the outline of his dick last week.”

Eyebrow cocked high, Lori looked up from her work. “Spectacular?” she asked seriously. When I groaned, she grinned. “Yeah, I’ll take that as a ‘holy shit, yes.’”

“As you should, but please don’t make me think any more about it.”

“I won’t.” Lori tipped her nose up and turned back to her screen. “I’m sure you’ll find plenty of temptation on your own. And considering the lackluster sex you endured for years with Aaron, I’m pretty confident you’ll at some point break.”

Amused, I shook my head. “You’re such a wonderful mentor, Lori.”

“Oh, I know. Now get out of my office. I have work to do and so do you,” she said as she began typing busily at her computer. “And by work I mean Mason Leo.”

I laughed. “Alright, I’m leaving.”

“Keep me posted on the fauxmance, heartbreaker. See you in two weeks.”

Chapter Seven

If I had to have a coming out with Mason, Lady Mercer was undeniably the spot to do it. By the time we arrived, it was a blaring full house. Ducking my head just a bit, I let Mason guide me to our table with a hand on my back.

"In case you forgot, the point is to be seen," he said, reading the intimidation on my face. Despite working for a restaurant group, I was inexperienced with places like these – the ultra-trendy scenes with waiters gliding about like performers and heads constantly turning to see who had just walked in. I'd definitely noticed eyes peering over as the host showed us to our reserved booth. Already in my own head, I tried to distract myself by admiring the restaurant décor.

An amber glow lit the stately shelf behind the bar, stacked from floor to ceiling with all the best wines and spirits from around the globe. Lining the floors was distressed tile and stretching the antique mirrored walls were leather banquettes packed to the gills with beautiful people – many of whom were still looking our way as we got seated, the first in our party to arrive. *Damn it*. No matter how much I tried to think of something else, my mind couldn't stop returning to the fact that this was my first time stepping out with Mason as a couple and while I'd imagined it would be fun, I couldn't help feeling like a giant ball of nerves.

"Any chance you'll actually survive this evening?" Mason asked, noticing the shaking in my arms as I turned to let him take my coat. I was ready to scoff some form of "of course I am" but when I turned back around, my mouth snapped shut. *Damn*. Having shed his own coat, Mason now stood in dark jeans and a grey, cashmere sweater that stretched just tight enough over his broad chest and the rest of that tapered torso. *Woof.* I had to admire for a second. Couldn't even help it. Thankfully, his blue eyes were doing something similar to me. "Did I buy that for you?" he asked of the turtleneck sweater dress that stretched down to just an inch above my knees. Paired with knee-high boots, I had barely any skin showing. Of course, the piece was tighter than tight, thanks to the fact that my favorite red-haired devil had been the one to pick it out.

"Sofia bought it for my birthday last year," I replied.

Mason nodded. “Remind me to thank her later.” He indulged in another second of staring before bringing his eyes to mine. “In the meantime, I’m going to need you to do something besides the deer in headlights look. You’re giving everyone the impression that I brought you here at gunpoint.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re sweet.”

“Seriously. Looking even moderately enthused will do.”

“Yeah, duly noted. How could I say no to such a sweet and sensitive boyfriend?”

Mason smirked as he whipped the black scarf from his neck. “I didn’t realize sweet and sensitive was what you wanted.”

“I think that’s what most girlfriends want, but I understand that you wouldn’t know that,” I replied, averting my eyes as Mason watched me gather my hair over one shoulder.

“Duly noted. If that’s what works with you, then here.” One step forward and Mason was suddenly inches from me. The breath hitched in my throat as he locked his gaze on mine. *Shit.* I hadn’t expected him to bust out sweet and sensitive so quickly and I wasn’t quite ready for it. I was frozen despite the warmth of his chest as he grabbed my waist, slid his hands down to my hips and pulled me so close that my forehead met his lips. My pulse picked up as Mason pressed a soft kiss to my skin and murmured, “Everything’s fine, Taylor. You have me.” The smooth baritone of his voice was as intoxicating as his scent and it had my lashes fluttering. I didn’t even remember to exhale till he pulled away, eyes glinting as he hit me with that crooked grin full of amusement. “There. How you feeling now?”

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ears. “Dandy,” I managed.

“That works fine for me.”

I could swear by the way he looked at me that Mason knew exactly what the hell he was doing – that he enjoyed making me at least a little uncomfortable, and I found it so damned irritating. But I couldn’t dwell on the thought because it wasn’t long after that that his friends began to roll in, starting a big round of introductions. Immediately, everything on my body was shaking – my hands, my knees, my attempt at a charming smile. I was so intensely nervous for everyone’s reception to our coupling, but while there was some brief gawking and a couple raised eyebrows, no one said anything that even bordered on out of line. The worst comment came from a cute ballerina-looking girl who said merrily that I traded up, and that finally made me laugh and relax a bit. I was even able to talk with

convincing breeziness about how I was *so* okay now, and how Aaron leaving was an absolute shock but "recent developments" had me recovering at a much quicker speed than expected. That line, of course, came with a loving glance at Mason.

Not the worst, Taylor. B-plus, I had to commend myself. I was doing slowly better. Still, as we sat, Mason kept his hand wrapped around mine, squeezing every time it started to shake again, which was generally when someone spoke to me about the wedding.

"Jesus Christ. Easy," Mason said as Sofia led the rest of the table into some heated conversation about politics. Her least favorite subject, but she'd caught a few of my anxious looks and I knew she was doing her best to draw attention away from me. I thanked God for that – and the fact that Mason was being borderline kind to me right now. "Taylor, everything's fine. You did great just now. You can relax."

"I am relaxed," I said, though I could see him dubiously eyeing my bouncing knee. Reaching across my lap, he squeezed it firmly, nearly stopping my heart with his thumb pressed against my inner thigh, his hand rubbing slow circles till I finally stopped shaking.

"What are you so anxious about?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"I can't put my finger on it," I murmured, avoiding his eye. "I guess I didn't really think about how scary it would be to actually come out to people as your girlfriend – people who kind of know who I am. I feel like they're judging me. They think I'm sleeping with you now when I was engaged to Aaron nine weeks ago."

"You still waited longer than he did to move on."

The words stung for a second but I moved past it. "Yeah well, girls get more flack for everything. Double standards, slut shaming. All that jazz."

"I wouldn't argue that."

I turned to him. "No?"

"You look surprised."

I took a second to assess my reaction. "I guess I didn't expect that from someone who treats women like they're…" I trailed off, feeling for the first time kind of bad about trashing Mason.

"Treat women like they're what?" he asked.

"Disposable."

Mason raised his eyebrows and leaned back as if settling in for this conversation. “And how exactly do I do that?” he asked, withdrawing his hand from my knee. I blinked down at the sudden loss of his touch. I hated the cold void it left on my skin.

“Well… I’ve heard many a story about girls you’ve humiliated without so much as batting an eye. Stuff about having more than one date lined up for an event, going with whoever wore the tighter dress. Ignoring girls you’ve been with in the past when you see them in public. Taking some poor woman for a weekend in Lake Como and sending her home after meeting an Italian supermodel.”

Mason laughed. “Fuck, that’s cold.”

“Uh, yeah. I’d agree.”

“It also never happened, Taylor,” Mason said, his eyes incredulous on me. “I did take someone to Lake Como for a weekend last year but *she* was the Italian model. She flew home alone because she had work in Milan and I had work in New York. But we both left pretty pleased with our weekends,” he explained, sending shame to my cheeks. “Now that I’ve clarified that particular crock of shit, may I ask who you even heard it from?”

I chewed my lip back. One or two stories came from Sofia, who was often left to comfort the girls Mason suddenly stopped texting after a week of passion. But the main perpetrator of Mason rumors was of course Aaron, and suddenly I felt stupid admitting that my intel came from someone whose love-hate relationship with his brother leaned almost always toward the latter, and mostly due to jealousy he couldn’t even try to hide.

“I think you can guess who told me,” I finally said.

“Yeah, that little shit. I’ll give him credit though. Pitting two girls against each other in some kind of out-sexing competition is definitely a compelling idea.”

“Funny,” I remarked. “So two dates in one night. Never happened?”

“No.”

“And the girls you shunned in public?”

“I’ve been short with the few who interrupted me during business lunches. But I’d just rather not subject clients to conversations that include women thanking me for the multiple orgasms last night. I know they’re just trying to keep themselves in my memory, but I suspect my gifted cock isn’t exactly a professional topic of discussion.”

I raised my eyebrows. I definitely agreed but I didn't let that on. "Maybe they resort to that because you won't answer their texts."

Mason laughed. "You're right, I don't answer all the texts I receive. There are only so many different ways to say 'thank you' and 'very nice' to pictures of naked tits."

I choked on my water. "And here I thought you liked nudes."

Mason nodded his thanks for the Scotch the waiter placed in front of him. "I prefer my women naked in person. That said, I'm still very much open to receiving nudes of any kind from you."

"Color me charmed. I'll get right on that."

Mason laughed. "I know I'm not getting naked pictures from you, Taylor. I've already made my peace with that."

"Oh, I'm so glad. What did you try – meditation?"

"Philosophy. I think Plato said something about sexting being a form of hedonism."

"I must've missed that lecture in college. Probably because I didn't go to college."

Mason turned to me with the truest surprise I'd ever seen on his face. "You? Didn't go to college?"

I shrugged. "Does that completely shatter your image of me?"

"Kind of. I had a pretty vivid picture of you being the buzzkill who called campus security on parties."

I let out a sharp laugh that had everyone glancing over with curious amusement. Mouthing *sorry,* I quickly hid my face, turning my blushing cheeks back to Mason who was watching me with a big smile. I suppressed my own giggle. *Weird.* I didn't expect this particular conversation to lighten my mood but somehow, it was doing the job.

"Alright, so now that we've debunked the myth of how I grossly mistreat women, are we done covering exactly why you've hated me all these years or is there something else to it?" Mason asked.

My smile faltered. Instantly, the question had bad memories trying to crawl their way to the forefront of my mind, but with my nerves freshly pacified, I refused to let them. "That covers it," I lied, flashing a bright smile.

"Good. Then cheers."

I accepted the glass of wine Mason handed me. "To what?"

“The fact that everyone in this room is watching you right now,” he said as he peered out at the restaurant. “So either you show them something right now or I will.”

“That sounds remarkably dirty. What exactly are we talking about?”

“Our recent spectators thanks to your ear-shattering laughter,” Mason said, prompting me to roll my eyes. “I mean we’re supposed to be a couple. Might as well take advantage and explicitly show that right now.”

“What, you want a kiss or something?”

“Since you offered so sensually.”

“Shut it.”

Mason laughed. “A passionate gesture of any sort if what I’m looking for. Now before we lose our audience, who’s doing it? You or me?”

My eyes fluttered. “What? I don’t know,” I muttered, feeling awkward and rushed. But since I was afraid of what liberties Mason might take with a sexy public gesture, I finally blurted, “I’ll do it,” and slapped a hand square on his chest, leaning hastily into his body to sell it. “There. Done,” I breathed out in relief but then I blinked. *Shit*. I stared down at my palm – at my fingers dipping into the deep-cut lines of Mason’s muscled chest. The heat of his body under my skin lit my cheeks right on fire, but they burned for different reasons when he broke the silence and laughed.

“Very sexy, Taylor. You nailed it.”

“What?” My tone was defensive despite knowing that there was nothing visually erotic about what I just did. I basically smacked him and stuck my face a few inches closer to his. Still, that didn’t change the fact that his pecs felt like fucking steel under my hands. That sexiness was undeniably real, but it didn’t keep Mason from snorting at me.

“I don’t know, Taylor. That felt more domestic dispute than it did tender, loving moment.”

My face flushed pink but I snorted, shaking my head at the sheer entertainment gleaming in his eyes. “Fine, asshole. You want sexy?”

“I do,” he smirked. “Show me sexy.”

“You got it – *babe*.”

Before he could hit back with any snarky reply, I dropped my hand from his chest, stroking down the front of his body and curling my fingertips against every solid ridge of his six-pack. *Jesus*. I nearly shuddered. Just touching him gave me a painfully vivid picture of what those insane abs looked like naked and it made me rake my bottom lip

between my teeth. Biting back the mischief that curled my mouth, I hooked my fingers into the top of his jeans, my knuckles brushing cashmere before they pressed against his hard, bare hipbone. *Ho-ly shit.* I could feel the absolute heat emanating from his smooth skin as I realized my fingers were only inches from, well, that famously endowed cock of his. I let myself process that – the fact that if I slid my touch just a bit further down on Mason, I'd brush against that incredibly thick root I caught the clear outline of the other day at my apartment. God, I probably wouldn't even be able to wrap my hand around it completely hard.

Jesus, Taylor, I exhaled. And before my imagination got too carried away, I let go of him. *Good God.* Did I just fucking do that?

Wetting my lips, I looked up at Mason's face stripped of smugness, his chiseled features overcome with a look of – was it? – yes, that was plain, thick lust in his eyes that had me almost writhing in my seat. I swallowed the knot in my throat. "Sexy enough for you?"

"If I say no, will you keep going?"

I broke into a laugh. "You really want me to go further than that in public?"

"I'll take more wherever you'll give it to me. We can go in the coat check or the fucking walk-in cooler. I'll tell Noah to clear out the kitchen."

"As romantic as that sounds, no."

"Fine," Mason laughed. With a low groan, he sat up again, spreading in his seat so that our legs pressed tight against each other, our thighs practically exchanging heat.

"What, you're squishing me now as punishment?" I cocked my eyebrow. When he shook his head, I asked, "What are you doing?"

"Making room in my pants for the damage you did."

Peering instinctively down at his crotch, my jaw dropped and my head snapped quickly up again to stare ahead. *Holy hell – how?* Somehow, the damage I'd done in two seconds of faked sexiness was significant enough to require some very extensive snaking down the left leg of his jeans. Seriously. Last week's under-the-pants outline was absolutely nothing compared to today and it had me suddenly experiencing all my shock in the form of throbbing between my legs. *Shit.* Arching my back, I sat forward, refusing to let Mason catch the look on my face. "I just need a minute here," he laughed, clearly entertained by my discomfort.

“That’s fine,” I returned, quickly inserting myself into the travel conversation going on across from me. Despite immersing myself quickly, throwing in bits of my own road tripping stories here and there, my body was still buzzing, completely flooded with heat. Probably because Mason had yet to move or speak behind me and the thought of his blood still rushing hot to one place was driving my pulse through the roof. Minutes passed and our legs still hot against each other, his dick apparently still throbbing through denim. I had actually *caught* the twitch under his jeans before looking away and five minutes later, I was still envisioning it. I couldn’t stop thinking about it, nor could I believe that my little stunt had gotten a guy like Mason Leo hard as a rock in the middle of a fucking restaurant.

Caving, I finally glanced over my shoulder at him. *Lord.* It was instant fucking arousal when I found him looking visibly tortured as he sat back, his jaw slack and his heavy-lidded stare pinned to my backside. When he lifted it to me, I expected a laugh or a smirk or some kind of smug look but I got nothing – just the hot intensity of his gaze sending sparks of electricity across my skin.

“Excuse me,” I said suddenly, deciding that I needed desperately to use the restroom – or any space where I could avoid Mason for a second. Because despite the conversation I carried on easily with his friends, all I could think of was one dirty, filthy and seriously uncharacteristic thing.

Giving him relief.

Seriously, Taylor? I couldn’t believe myself, nor could I erase the image of my aching fingers curling, wrapping tight around him and feeling just how hot, hard and thick he was. I was being legitimately crazy and I told myself that. But I also told myself that all I needed was a quick look in the mirror and splash of water on my face to remember who I was, where I was and how much I didn’t actually want to give Mason Leo a public handjob. In fact, I didn’t want to give him one anywhere.

“Okay,” I exhaled, comfortably locked in the dimly lit bathroom and staring at my reflection. My cheeks were rosy and my lips were red, swollen as if I’d been kissing someone. Gathering my hair off my hot neck, I rolled my head back and closed my eyes. I thought about the deal I’d struck with Mason – about the fact that anything going on between us was a product solely of that. I thought about how this act was for Aaron and about how long it’d been since I’d had sex with him or anyone else. That was the

obvious culprit for the sudden fever just now. I mean I'd gotten laid at least four times a week for three years till Aaron left. In the past nine weeks, I'd had nothing. I was in a drought, thirsty and susceptible to heat. That explained pretty much everything.

You're fine, I told myself, repeating it till I believed it enough to run my hand through my hair and open the door. *You're fine*, I repeated.

But once I stepped in the hall, I gasped.

"Taylor."

"What's up, princess?"

Two familiar faces grinned wide at me – a sandy blonde in a slate blue suit and a goateed idiot drenched as usual in cologne. Tripp and Trevor. Fuck, I forgot which was which but I knew I hated them both. They were former colleagues of Aaron and I'd found them crude, immature and insufferable even before they planned my then-fiancé's secret going away party – or in my mind, his "leaving Taylor in the dust" party.

"Hi," I said curtly, knowing well from the leering looks in their eyes that they had nothing good to say. "Excuse me," I said, stepping past them and walking away before I had to hear any of their bullshit.

"Saw you jerking Mase under the table just now," one of them called after me. My stomach lurched. Begrudgingly, I stopped to turn around, my heart thumping at the loathsome, disgusting looks on both their faces. "Good stuff. Love seeing you lose the classiness for once. It was always kind of boring."

"First of all, that's obviously not what was happening," I said, gritting my teeth. "Second, you're friends of Aaron and considering you threw his goodbye party, you know that he left me to marry another woman, so it's honestly more than fair game for me to have moved on."

"To his brother though? That's cold. I mean once upon a time, I'm pretty sure you hated that guy," said the blonde, whichever his stupid name was.

"Yeah, and now you're fucking him? Considering you hated us too, does that mean we're next?"

I stared at them both. "Excuse me?"

"Tripp and I are happy to volunteer for the job if you're just fucking anyone to piss off Aaron." Trevor rubbed his goatee slowly, in a way that had my skin crawling and my legs feeling like lead. "Just call us when you and Mase are done bumping nasties."

Tripp laughed .“Don’t worry, Tay, no threesomes. We’ll just take turns with a good girl like you.”

I couldn’t leave faster. My heart was pounding, their laughter fading from my ears as I stormed furiously away, my heels clicking so loudly and rapidly Mason caught my eye from well across the dining room. He sat up fast, frowning hard at whatever look was stricken on my face. Before I could even get back to the table, he was up and pacing toward me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stopping me at the end of the bar.

“Aaron’s friends,” was all I muttered, my voice trembling.

“Which ones? Where?” Mason demanded, already heated. Peering toward the front door, I watched Tripp and Trevor shrug their coats on, smiling as they watched me. But the smiles fell off their faces when Mason followed my eye line to find them. Suddenly, they were getting dressed a bit faster. “What did they do?”

“Asked if it was their turn with me next.”

I had barely finished my sentence before Mason was rushing toward the door, prompting Tripp to shove Trevor fast out the restaurant. “Mason, wait,” I pleaded. A hush had fallen over the room and I was well aware that at least half the restaurant was watching now as I tried to stop Mason from chasing two morons out into the cold. “Mase!” I hissed as he pushed out the front doors and onto the freezing cold sidewalk. *Shit, shit, shit*, I cursed as I hurried to follow.

Outside, the wind whipped me relentlessly. Hair flying backward, my shoulders shrugged and I hugged myself tight as I looked around for Mason. “Fuck,” I cursed when I heard a near comical yelp coming from the side of the restaurant. Turning the corner, my wild eyes caught Tripp speeding away in the back of a cab before they found Mason, his expression blank and calm as he muttered an inch from Trevor’s red face. A vein bulged from Trevor’s forehead as he stood pinned to the wall by Mason’s flexed forearm pushing against his throat without mercy.

“Oh my God – Mase!” I yelled, bursting forward. “Stop!”

He finished whatever he was snarling under his breath at Trevor, sending the message home with a hard glare before letting go. He watched Trevor crumble, not quite to the ground, but enough for one last bruise to the ego. In shock, I stood there, shivering furiously and staring as Mason stood undaunted in the freezing cold, sleeves rolled up and his gaze almost

bored as he watched Trevor struggle to regain his footing. Grabbing the back of his collar, Mason pulled him to his feet. “Apologize to her.”

“Sorry.”

Mason glanced at me. He read my expression then turned back to Trevor. “Try it again.”

Making eye contact this time, Trevor spoke shakily through clenched teeth. “I’m sorry, Taylor. Bad joke and I apologize.”

He didn’t mean it but I didn’t want to look at him for another second so I nodded and muttered, “Just go.” He did but I heard him mutter *slut* under his breath right after he turned the corner. My gaze flicked quickly to Mason to make sure he didn’t hear. He didn’t. The tightness in his jaw had relaxed and he was coming toward me now.

“You alright?” he asked, sounding more casual than I could process. I studied him, unsure of what to make of my emotions. Now I had shock and gratitude joining my embarrassment and shame. I wished it would all just cancel each other out but instead, it all broiled together to confuse the hell out of me.

“I’m fine,” I finally said. “You didn’t have to defend me.” I was half expecting to hear the words “I wanted to” but Mason moved straight past the topic.

“Should we get you inside? You’re going to freeze.” His eyes lowered to my shivering body and though he stood close, he didn’t touch or try to warm me. Still hugging myself, I shook my head.

“I think I need a minute. Kind of humiliated.”

“Why?” Mason frowned. “Those idiots should be the ones who are embarrassed.”

I could feel the bitterness in my smile. “They’re idiots but they aren’t completely off base to think what they think. You have a reputation and I’m freshly heartbroken. It’s going to look to most people like you’re taking advantage of me right now, it’s just the truth.”

It was quiet for a second. “Well what can I do?”

“What – to show them I’m not another one of your dirty, one-week flings?” I had to laugh as I rubbed my arms to warm myself. “Short of marrying me, nothing. And I guess I’m realizing that a little too late,” I said, my eyes on the floor now as I thought about how stupid I probably looked to everyone inside that restaurant. *Goddamnit, Taylor*. Mason came off great – like he’d just landed his most interesting conquest yet. But all I

looked like was desperate, foolish and soon-to-be used. Fuck. Now I wasn't so sure it was the cold I was shuddering over.

"That can't be true. There has to be something I can do," Mason said, a frown knitting his brows.

"I don't think there is. And I'm pretty certain now that overtly sexy gestures in public won't do anything but make me look even more like one of your cheap hookups, so yeah. Definitely putting an end to that one," I muttered, feeling myself getting negative. "Anyway." I nodded inside. "I'm cold."

Back inside, we returned to our seats and I let Mason do the talking this time. Much to my relief, Noah was out from the kitchen and effectively distracting everyone with talks of some party he was throwing tomorrow night. I smiled with the rest of them, acted interested and complimented the food. But I was numb inside and while no one else noticed, Mason seemed to sense it because as the rest of the table chatted, he put his arm around me, leaning in close to my ear.

"I'll figure something out, alright?" he murmured. I caught Sofia's doting eyes on us across the table as Mason gently squeezed my arm. She grinned at me, clearly assuming that he was whispering sweet nothings in my ear when it was quite the opposite. "Just because I'm not marrying you doesn't mean we can't make you look like my girlfriend instead of some cheap fling."

"Sure," I said. He sounded genuine but I took his words with a grain of salt, shrugging his arm off my shoulder as I realized that in terms of image, the perks of our arrangement were a little one-sided. Angling his body toward me, Mason tilted his head to meet my eye.

"What, is this our first fight as a couple?"

I cut my eyes to him but gave no answer. I wanted to tell him that I was out – that our deal was done and I'd transfer back the absurd amount of money he put in my account. But I felt my mood shifting as my eyes trailed from the bow of his lips up the blade of his nose, landing finally on those pools of blue boring into me. *Damn it*. I cursed myself as I surrendered with an answer.

"Yes."

"Well, I guess that's a rite of passage for us."

"Maybe."

“I’d crack a joke about make-up sex but I have a hunch it’d be poorly received.”

I suppressed my amusement. “At least you’re starting to learn.”

“Everyone has to start somewhere. And hey, in honor of our first fight, I promise to find some way to make it up to you.”

“Good luck,” I said brusquely. Studying me, Mason smirked.

“You should know I have a history of being turned on by angry women so it’s really in your best interest to forgive me.”

I snorted. “That explains a lot about your personality.”

“To be clear, it’s not like I start arguments for the pleasure of it. I’m just saying that angry sex is generally good sex, so for that reason, I might get turned on by an incredibly attractive woman who’s pissed off at me. Call it a Pavlovian response.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Fancy term.”

“Shit, right. Should I avoid words more than three syllables now that I know you didn’t go to college?”

“God.” I turned away from him, laughing despite myself.

“Hey, none of that. I earned that smile, so let me see it.” I ignored Mason to lean forward on the table, trying to get Sofia’s attention but he pulled me easily back, leaning into me and catching my jaw. My pulse picked up as he gave that sexy laugh and turned me to face him. “Don’t be stubborn,” he murmured as I stared skyward with my grin bitten back. “Let me see those lips.”

Fuck. Something about his words prickled hot over my skin and just like that, the deep throbbing returned between my thighs. It swelled deeper as Mason drew his thumb over my bottom lip to coax it out, a crooked smile twisting the corner of his mouth as he eyed my bitten, red lips.

“There she is,” Mason laughed as I reminded myself to breathe because fuck, that face was even more dangerously handsome up close and personal. *Damn it, Mase.* Thrill and sheepishness buzzed in my cheeks as I sensed the rest of the table watching now. There were little coos and giggles from the girls but it was Noah who finally spoke up for the guys.

“Jesus Christ, I can’t watch this sappy shit anymore.”

Breaking away from Mason, I covered my face with my hands, the rest of the table laughing now and teasing us both. My heart raced and my entire body was hot as Mason put his arm around me, good natured as he joked back with his friends and told Noah that envy wasn’t a good look. *God,*

what just happened? I asked myself, feeling hot, bothered and worst of all, charmed by Mason, especially as he pulled me closer to him and kissed the top of my head. Peeking out from my fingers, I peered at Sofia giggling across the table, pointing at me and touching her cheeks to indicate the red in mine. I rolled my eyes at her but I couldn't help but agree when she later came down to my end, scooting next to me and whispering, "See? I told you about the Leos. They'll drive you fucking insane but you can't stop loving them."

Ugh. Love was definitely not the word.

Still, she was onto something.

Chapter Eight

Like a daily insult, Aaron's mail continued to be sent to my address. I was in the midst of sorting through it the next day when a knock came at my door. I jumped to my feet, my instinct to change out of my baggy T-shirt and frayed sweats. But then I realized it couldn't be Mason at the door because he'd never knock or wait so politely for me to answer.

"Hi?" I said, confused when I saw the young man outside in my hall. He was dressed far better than I was and he had a polite smile for me as he held out his hand. Blinking down, I realized he was holding an elegantly embossed black shopping bag. "For you, Miss Simms."

"Oh." My eyebrows shot up when I took the small bag and felt its weight drag my hand down. "Thank you," I murmured before he gave a single nod and left. The second I closed the door, I rushed to my kitchen table, shoving Aaron's mail haphazardly aside to make room for the bag holding something that had me more desperately curious than I could ever remember feeling.

Reaching in, I first pulled out a card. I nearly cast it right aside since I was used to cards never having actual handwritten messages on them. But this one did and sitting back down in my chair, I read it.

I've bought clothing for women but never jewelry. Wear this tonight and show everyone that my girlfriend has me whipped enough to buy precious stones.

Pick you up at 9.

M

I stared. Was he fucking kidding?

I didn't care to stand around and ponder it. Suddenly, I was like a sugar-crazed kid on Christmas morning, tearing through the bag and wrapping to find myself finally holding a dark navy blue rectangular box. I stared at the name of the jeweler and held my breath, urging myself not to put it past Mason to play some elaborate joke on me. I could very well open the box and find inside a pebble from his shoe or a fucking Ring Pop. *Don't*

get your hopes up, I breathed as I gently lifted the top of the box. *Just take it easy and relax.*

But that proved impossible once I saw what lay inside the box.

"Oh my God," I whispered, instantly floored and nearly blinded by the dazzling rock staring back at me. It was a single circular diamond pendant hanging from a yellow gold chain in the shape of a Y. And it was, in the severest understatement, beautiful. "Oh… my God," I had to repeat, realizing that the breathy awe I heard from the leading ladies of the most romantic movies was a very real thing. Because I was truly and genuinely speechless, fully convinced that every time that diamond sparkled, it stole another breath of air from my lungs.

Rushing to the bathroom, I went to try it on. But I couldn't bear to see the pendant sitting atop a stained, blue T-shirt so before I did, I stripped off my top, and since it was equally awful, my bottoms. And suddenly, I was in a pair of black panties with a thread of gold draped over my collarbones. Falling between my cleavage was the stem of the Y-shaped chain, and settling right between my breasts was that diamond I swore I could look at forever. It was so incredibly beautiful and it made me feel just the same.

I needed to text Sofia. It was just my girly instinct.

But the second I held my phone in my hands, I found myself typing instead to Mason. His reply came instantaneously and shocking even myself, I giggled at our conversation.

ME: Mase what the fuck. It's beautiful.
MASON: Glad you like it
ME: Tell me not to get attached because it's rented
MASON: It's yours. I hope it makes you feel better than you felt yesterday
ME: It makes me feel better than I've felt in years.
MASON: I'll be sure to tell Aaron
ME: Ha.
MASON: Send me a picture
ME: Of me in it?
MASON: No of the sky. What else would I be asking for?
ME: I can't now but later.
MASON: Why?
MASON: Tell me it's because you tried it on naked.
MASON: In case it's not clear I'm sexting you now.

MASON: For the love of God let me see you Taylor.

I bit my lip so hard at that last text I could feel my pulse in it when I released. Ignoring Mason's flirtation, I hit my speed dial to call Sofia, who answered right on the first ring.

"You coming to Noah's tonight?"

I blinked. "Oh. Noah's? Maybe. Mason said we're going somewhere tonight, but he didn't tell me where."

"Probably Noah's. He's having people over his house tonight and in case you haven't been, his house is ah-mazing."

"Oh. Cool," I said, pausing for a second and trying to think of a transition. But there was none worthy so I went for it. "So… Mason bought me a diamond."

"*What?*"

I had to spend a good minute calming her down and reassuring her that Mason hadn't lost his mind and proposed and when I did, she was still rambling "*omigod*" on repeat and asking to see it. So rifling through my dresser, I yanked on an easy bandeau bra, snapped a picture and sent it.

"Whoa, girl. *Whoa!* Whoa." I could practically see Sofia's progression of faces as she looked at the photo I sent. "Is that really…? Oh my God. That's the sexiest diamond I've ever seen. And it looks so pretty between your boobs but girl, you cannot wear that band-aid bra tonight. That would be such a buzzkill. This kind of necklace is *made* for showing off cleavage, which should really not come as a shock to you."

I laughed. I couldn't even be mad at Mason for picking something that required a low-cut top. I was too blinded by the sparkle.

"God, I think that thing is bigger than the rock Aaron bought you," Sofia marveled. "Is it?"

I stood in front of my full-length mirror, in almost a trance as I muttered, "Not sure. Don't care."

"Yeah, you probably can't remember any other dude that exists on this earth right now," Sofia snorted. "No one except your man."

I wiggled my lips at myself. "Maybe."

"'Maybe my ass. By the way, do you have any wine at your house?"

"Bottles you bought me. Are you asking because you're coming over?"

"If you think I trust you to pick out a dress that does that rock justice, you're already drunk."

“I’m not, but fair enough. You gotta do my makeup too then.”

“Deal. I’ll call Mase to tell him I’m your escort tonight!” Sofia said excitedly. On the other end, I could already hear the sound of her bounding into her room to pack up her kit of luscious blushes and lipsticks. “Alright, goodbye for now, beautiful! But I’m so excited to see you!” she trilled into the phone. “You too, Taylor,” she added before hanging up.

“Bye,” I laughed, tossing my phone on the bed to gingerly brush the tips of my fingers along my beautiful diamond. Sofia was right. I couldn’t think of anyone but Mason when I looked at it, mostly because I couldn’t wait to see his reaction to me wearing it. And somewhere in the back of my head, I wondered if he really needed to spend this kind of money on a gesture to simply lift my bad mood.

Or if there was actually a place in his heart where I was more than a prop.

“So pretty,” I breathed to myself as I turned a few degrees to admire the sparkle of the diamond at a different angle. It was just so incredibly breathtaking – the most beautiful thing I owned and probably the last thing my head needed.

* * *

According to Lori, every woman had not just a little black dress, but her little black dress moment. That apparently came when through either coincidence or a tireless search, you found “the one.” It would just feel right in your hands, and even better as you pulled it up on your body and felt it wrap tight around your curves. Whether it needed to be zipped up or stretched on, it would qualify as the winner if you looked in your reflection in the mirror and said, “Mother*fucker*, I look good.” My reaction tonight was slightly less profane, actually more of a simple “*yes*,” but the way I breathed it out made Sofia shudder.

“Stop! The sex faces again.”

So I held it in. But I did love the way I looked in the simple, long-sleeved dress with its short skirt and plunging V-neck. Considering the new thigh-high boots I paired with it, I knew I was flirting with danger.

“He’s going to jump your bones the second he sees you tonight,” Sofia warned as she did her makeup at my dresser. “You might have to take off

that necklace and lend it to me to wear for a few hours. So you don't lose it while you're having your roll in the hay."

"We're not going to a farm."

"Your roll in the sack. Or since we're talking Noah's house, your roll in the… four thousand dollar Swedish mattress."

"Yeah, I'm not having sex with Mason at Noah's house," I said, my cheeks hot. *Or anywhere*.

"Seriously? If my boyfriend bought me that necklace, I'd have sex with him on the street if he wanted."

"Dear God, Sofia."

She giggled as she powdered her heart-shaped face. "Seriously. Let's pretend Noah's my boyfriend. If Noah fought some asshole in my honor and followed that up by dropping…" Through the mirror, she squinted at my necklace. "At *least* five G's on a diamond for me, I'd gladly let him bend me over any surface in this city and fuck me till he had to carry me home."

"Jesus, it sounds like you just want to fuck Noah," I smirked.

"Don't change the subject on me. We're talking about you and Mason and the fact that he is either in love with you or falling fast."

I let out a shrill laugh. "Whoa, let's not talk the L word. That's a little intense."

"Fine. But you gotta admit that some of this is surprising. I knew he liked you, Taylor and you know *I* love you, but I really never expected Mase to care about any women as much as he already cares about you."

I pursed my lips as I thought about it. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised by some of Mason's gestures. We were very much a fake couple but he was very truly angered yesterday when I told him about Aaron's colleagues. I could excuse him chasing after them and forcing Trevor to apologize to me because there were witnesses for that – that lent well to our act. But I couldn't think of an explanation for the way Mason had caught my eye the second I returned from the bathroom. Before anyone else even noticed, he had detected my distress from afar and I had seen the concern in his eyes. When he rushed to ask what happened, his back was turned to the dining room so no one could see the look of unfiltered anger haunting his face as he demanded to know how I was wronged. I'd thought about it last night in bed and though I knew I was indulging in over-analysis, I

concluded that Mason's need to defend my honor last night wasn't completely an act and it was kind of nice to realize.

Of course, another part of me hated realizing that too because it confused the hell out of me. After dinner at Lady Mercer last night, and after acting a bit cutesy with Mason, I'd already woken up feeling vaguely different – happier than usual but wary of feeling that way. It was such a push and pull within my own body that I tried to numb my brain by doing something mundane and slightly torturous, like sorting Aaron's mail.

But then that incredible damned diamond arrived at my door.

"Yeah." I shook my head to myself, staring for the hundredth time at its radiating beauty. "This is just… so crazy."

Sofia beamed. "Sure is. But it's awesome and beautiful and you should just own it."

I ran my finger along the fine chain of the necklace. "Well, he bought it for me so I think I do own it."

"I mean your relationship with Mason," Sofia said dryly. "I can see you being overwhelmed by it and it's totally understandable, but you should just embrace what you're feeling right now, Taylor. I mean when was the last time you felt as happy as you do right now?"

I frowned as I thought about it. "God, that's a good question. Um…"

Oddly enough, the first thought that popped into mind was my first promotion at Vandermark four years ago, before I even met Aaron. Of course, I *was* happy with Aaron in the first eight to ten months of our relationship. But I couldn't pin a specific day to compare to the heights I'd already felt today.

"You're taking forever to answer, so it was clearly ages ago," Sofia said, smacking her freshly painted lips. "Which means you're the happiest now that you've been in maybe *years* and considering everything – *everything*, including things that happened before Aaron even left," she said hastily, staring me down through the mirror to let me know she wasn't backing down from her words, "you really and truly deserve to live in this moment and take all the pleasure that life is offering you. Stop questioning. Just enjoy. And what better place to do it than Noah van Daal's crazy fucking bachelor pad, right?"

I smiled. "I don't know. I've never been there before."

Grabbing her clutch and coat off my dresser, Sofia spun to flash a big, dazzling smile. "Well you're about to, lady. Now put on your coat so you

can go wow your man and have the best fucking night of your life.”

Chapter Nine

I underestimated how much chefs made in New York, because Noah Van Daal's apartment knocked me damned near off my four-inch heels. The TriBeCa penthouse was the picture of modern luxury with heated walnut floors, its own private gym and an indoor pool, where apparently the majority of the party was gathered.

"No swimsuit?" Noah grinned as he greeted Sofia with a bear hug.

"Not swimming if you don't," Sofia said, pulling back to frown at his dry body fully clothed in a black crew neck and black jeans. Despite short, clean-cut hair that screamed corner office, tattoos peeked out from every edge of Noah's shirt. His dark eyes were bleary and from the way he held his drink, I guessed it probably wasn't his first, second or even eighth of the night. "Noah, you know Taylor, of course."

He gave me a single upward nod. Then upon spotting my necklace, he shielded his eyes. "Christ, it's like staring into the sun."

Sofia giggled, shedding her coat then taking mine. "Uh-huh. Your bestie bought it for her because he's whipped."

Noah's eyebrows ascended with downright shock. "*Mason* bought you that?" He paused for several moments to process the fact. "Fuck whipped, he's clearly neutered," he muttered, coming closer to let his glassy eyes examine me. Giving my thigh-high boots and little black dress the onceover, he nodded at me. "And I guess you're rewarding him by dressing like a sex kitten tonight. Good move, considering the raccoons."

"Raccoons?"

Sofia rolled her eyes. "Mason's groupies. Noah will explain why he calls them that. I'm not sticking around to listen though," she snorted, going off to put our coats somewhere. Once she was out of sight, Noah smirked.

"Before we get into that, how is it so far?"

"How is what?"

"Pretending you'd voluntarily date Mason," he replied. Before I could ask any questions, he supplied my answer. "I know the truth, he told me. But don't blame him, I would've figured it out on my own. I don't have quite as many… rainbows and unicorns in my heart as Sofia, so I wouldn't exactly buy the fact that you decided to hook up with Mase. Not after your rocky relationship with him the past few years."

I arched an eyebrow. “And how do you know about my relationship with Mason? He’s talked to you about me?”

“No, I know from Aaron,” Noah said, making me feel promptly idiotic for being so hopeful. “Your ex used to come to my parties sometimes. Which gets us back on the topic of the raccoons.”

“Right,” I made a face. “The groupies. Explain the nickname to me?”

Noah laughed. “The lady stalkers… they have these big, black rings around their eyes. I think they call it makeup, but Sof would disagree. They come out only at night. *Great* at breaking and entering and trying to pass it off as something cute. Can get destructive when they don’t get what they want. Also might as well be rabid and foaming at the mouth considering how desperate they are to get their hands on Mase. So good job wearing…” Noah trailed off to look me up and down again. “Whatever outfit this is ‘cause that’ll keep most of them at bay tonight. Can’t really compete with this look. Especially not when it includes that fucking rock.”

I couldn’t help my smile as I touched the stone between my cleavage. Taking advantage of Noah’s inebriated state, I asked, “Are you as surprised as I am?”

“By what?”

“The fact that he bought this for me.”

“Uh.” Noah gave a short laugh, running his hand through his hair and thoroughly messing it up. “I am definitely confused, yeah. But hey, when Mase wants to do something right he goes all in so maybe this is just him trying to show Aaron and the world that you two are a legit as fuck couple,” he said. But before my shoulders could even slump in disappointment, he added, “Or who knows – maybe it’s a sign of something else.”

I bit my lip. “Like what?”

“I dunno. That he likes you more than Eva Tully at least. Six months with her and he sure as shit never bought her anything like that. Definitely never busted out the PDA with her either, like he did with you at dinner last night. That gave me fucking cavities, by the way, so thanks for that display.”

“No problem. But like you said, he might just be doing all this to make us look like a real couple, right?” I prodded curiously, realizing shamefully that I was asking in hopes of being told otherwise.

“Well.” Noah squinted. Pausing, he rattled the ice cubes in his empty glass. “Fuck. When did I finish this?” he slurred. And just like that, I lost

his drunken attention. “Hey, everyone’s at the pool. Wanna get a drink?” he asked, as if forgetting our prior conversation entirely. A part of me was tempted to grab his shoulders and shake him back to consciousness, but as he swayed in front of me, I had to laugh and just let it go.

“Sure. Lead the way.”

Trailing behind, I followed Noah up two levels. The bass of the music faded into my ears and then blared the second we opened the sliding glass doors to the massive enclosed terrace. Lounging around the white couches and splashing in the glittery water were upwards of a hundred beautiful people. Amid them, I looked around for mine. I was eager to find Mason and I couldn’t deny that anymore. Between Sofia’s encouragement and Noah’s tipsy honesty, I found myself genuinely excited to see him, which was why my heart stopped when I finally found his blue eyes cutting into me from well across the roof.

Whoa.

I swallowed hard, both nervous and flattered by the way he looked at me. Despite everyone sitting down around him, he stood straight, coming to me as if I possessed a magnetic pull. I didn’t expect this reaction, nor did I expect it to freeze me in place. But it did and the second he was close enough to cup my elbow, my heart rate felt like it was double its usual. “Hey,” I managed.

“Hey. Christ, Taylor, you look fucking…” Eyes on my legs, Mason pressed his fist to his mouth. With a groan, he muttered, “Good,” before stepping back and clearing his throat. Tucking my hair behind my ear, I processed how impossibly good he looked himself in a white sweater with the sleeves pushed up his muscled forearms. “That necklace couldn’t look better on you.”

“Shocked, by the way, that you chose a necklace that basically lives in cleavage.”

Mason laughed. “Just had a feeling it’d look good on you. And Christ was I right.” I bit my lip. The words *thank you* were at the tip of my tongue but for some reason, they wouldn’t come out. Mason didn’t seem to care. Stepping closer, he peered out at the party and then pulled me into him by my waist. “Figured this was a good place to let you show the world how you’ve got me wrapped around your pinky.”

“I’d agree. And the diamond is definitely a good start.”

“I’d hope so. What else can I do to show them you’re not just a fling?”

I bit my lip, glancing around to confirm a few curious eyes before looking back at Mason. “I don’t know. Look at me like you’re smitten.”

Mason smirked but when he spoke, his voice was low and sober. “Easy,” he said, reaching to push a stray blonde lock behind my ear. Circling his arm around my waist, Mason pulled me tighter to him, till I could feel the solid strength of his chest against my bare skin. Despite my breasts pressed up against him, Mason kept his eyes on mine, his fingers lightly entwined in my hair. Catching the masculine scent of his skin, I felt nearly hypnotized so I forced myself to disrupt the moment.

“Not bad. Fairly convincing.”

Mason laughed. “I thought we were well past this game by now.”

“What game?” I blushed.

“The one where you act like I’m faking my physical attraction to you. You got my dick hard as a fucking rock in public yesterday. I think you should know by now that I genuinely enjoy looking at you and that it’s going to be torture for me tonight.”

I struggled to muster up a response. “What… what do you mean?”

“That I’m gonna get to watch you all night tonight – wear you on my arm, look at you, touch you. But I can’t go anywhere beyond that and if we’re being honest here, it’s going to fucking suck.”

My lashes fluttered with surprise for his words. He was always flirtatious but I was sure this was the first time Mason admitted to wanting something more from me beyond what we agreed to in our deal. The thought had my blood rushing to my cheeks, my lips – that annoying pulse between my thighs. “Well, maybe…” I trailed off, desperate to indulge my itch to flirt and provoke and see just how badly Mason wanted me. But I knew it was a bad idea, and I still had too much pride. “Maybe we can arrange for you to relieve your sexual frustrations with one of the more discreet raccoons here tonight.”

Mason choked with laughter. “Christ. Guessing you picked that up from Noah?”

“Yes,” I grinned, staring ahead at my hands pressed flat on Mason’s chest. I couldn’t resist smoothing them up his sweater, watching his eyes cloud over with what looked like desire as my fingers lightly stroked. “First and last time I’ll ever use that term. Promise.”

“Not a problem. And I have no interest in going near any of those girls tonight,” he said, smiling down at me. “My promise to you. Now let’s go

get a drink."

Predictably, I overanalyzed what Mason said as he brought me over to the couches he'd been sitting on with some of this friends I'd met yesterday at Noah's restaurant. I said my hellos and chatted, gushing genuinely with the wives and girlfriends about the diamond.

"Holy *hell*, that thing is bigger than my engagement ring," one of the women marveled before lowering her voice and huddling closer to me with her friends. "For God's sake, Taylor, you gotta tell us how on Earth you tamed Mason Leo because Lord knows we all tried our hand at it before settling for our husbands."

"*Quinn!*" one of the others gasped, smacking Quinn playfully. But then she turned to me with grave intensity. "Seriously though, what did you do? 'Cause I'll replicate it to a tee if it means I can get Stephen to buy me something half as fucking stunning as that."

I laughed nervously, briefly catching Mason's eye as he spoke with his friends. Goddamnit, he was sexy. One crooked grin in my direction and he had me genuinely giggling with the women. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I give him shit all the time and call him out for being an asshole. Maybe it's the honesty he likes," I joked.

"That and the fact that you look like walking sex tonight, girl," Quinn winked, giving me that last boost of confidence before Mason whisked me off to get a drink at the bar.

"Hitting it off with the WAGs, I see," he grinned, hand on my lower back as he asked the woman working the bar for a bourbon neat. "Not the easiest feat, so good job on that."

I smirked. "It's easy when they see you as the mystical fairy who finally put a lockdown on Mason Leo's famous dick."

Mason grinned. "For your own sake, I'm going to need you to not talk about my dick right now," he said, leaning against the bar to gaze down at my legs wrapped in suede. "Christ," he groaned under his breath before gathering himself and asking, "What would you like to drink?"

"I might need a second before I drink. I had a glass at home with Sofia."

Mason laughed. "Is your tolerance really that low?"

I parted my lips to answer but across the roof, I suddenly spotted a familiar brunette in a pink bikini, a giant smile on her lips as she hoisted her wet body out of the pool. "Fucking hell," I breathed out.

“What?” Mason turned just in time to see Whitney Decker giving a sultry toss of her wet hair behind her back. “Oh.” He returned his unfazed attention to me. “Say the word and Noah will tell her to leave.”

“No,” I tore my stare off of her. “I’d rather not give her the satisfaction of thinking I’m threatened. But now I think I do need to have a drink.”

“Good. Tequila?”

“Absolutely not,” I breathed out, ordering a Sauvignon Blanc instead. Off Mason’s unimpressed look, I said, “I have to. I stopped drinking for awhile, so I don’t have much of a tolerance anymore. Funny enough, it’s thanks to a night that has to do with Whitney.” I’d drunk myself halfway to death that awful night, certain that my relationship with Aaron was over thanks to Whitney Frickin’ Decker.

I found myself wanting Mason to ask about the night, but looking up at him, I found him returning a wave from some friends across the roof. My heart sagged a bit. I genuinely hated talking about Whitney, that night or any of the thing that tended to spiral me into the bad memories but for some reason, I was itching to talk about it with Mason right now. I couldn’t explain it, and I kind of hated myself for it because it was clear as Mason guided me back to the couches that he had no interest in hearing about whatever drama happened to me two years ago. He cared enough to defend my honor from sexist assholes like Aaron’s colleagues, but he didn’t care enough to take on any of my emotional burdens and that was perfectly fucking normal. I tried to remind myself of that as we sat down with his friends.

But I found myself falling into a bit of a mood as I sat there amid the jovial conversation, and it only worsened when Whitney pranced over and squeezed her bikini-clad body in a seat across from Mason and me. She didn’t immediately say anything but I could tell from the way she peered at us that she was brainstorming, trying to conjure up some of her best insult material yet. It made my body stiffen and with his arm around me, Mason clearly felt it because despite being in the midst of sports talk with Noah, he turned and cocked his head at me. “What’s up? You alright?” he asked. Just as I tried to answer, Whitney gasped and snatched his attention – along with everyone else’s.

“Mason Leo! Fucking your little brother’s ex,” she clucked scandalously, eyeing me to soak in the discomfort I refused to show. “I have to say, very charitable of you.”

Mason gave her a blank look. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“Just commending the fact that you’re using your sexual talents to boost this poor gal’s confidence. And I mean it’s working, right, Tay?” Whitney asked with a big smile. I didn’t engage in her bait, but she went on. “Fucking Mason to get over the fact that your fiancé left you for a ten?”

Jaws dropped around me but I stared barely a second before responding. “Yes, now that I’ve had Mase, it’s good to know that I almost married into a lifetime of mediocre sex.”

Dead quiet before, the crowd around us erupted into “*ooh*”s and raucous laughter. Slumped on the couch, drunker than ever, Noah nodded his approval and gave me a drunk thumbs up. I chewed my grin back, a chill rippling up my legs when Mason squeezed my bare knee.

“Easy, tiger.”

I looked up at him. “On what?”

“Complimenting me without warning. I’m not used to it and it’s extremely arousing.”

I laughed and took a drink of my wine. “Don’t get too excited. It’s not exactly a real compliment considering I’ve never actually had sex with you.”

“I think even you know that if you did, no one else in your history would compare,” Mason smirked. “Least of all my brother.”

Thinking about the somewhat routine sex I had with Aaron for years, I tilted my head. “You might have a point,” I said, expecting Mason to pump his fist in triumph but instead, he leaned his head back and groaned.

“Fuck, Taylor.”

“What? Feeling sexually frustrated by all this fake sex talk?” I teased quietly.

“Yes. Right on the money.”

“Would it be horrible then if I used you right now to further piss off Whitney?” I asked, eyeing her across from me. She was engaged in conversation with the guy next to her, but her eyes were us and shamefully so. They didn’t bother to avert even when I caught her stare.

“It would be torture. But I’m not going to stop you.”

I chewed my lip, already feeling the buzz from just half a glass of wine. So lifting my legs, I draped them over Mason’s lap. His heavy lidded eyes shot awake when my skirt rode several inches up my thighs. Sitting up, he pulled it down for me, muttering under his breath as he shook his head.

“Yeah, I know you don’t actually belong to me but fuck if I’m going to let any guy here look up your skirt.”

“Sorry,” I grinned, crossing one leg over the other. Mason watched my dress ride up another inch but this time he left it to study me with disbelief.

“You know, you’re fucking evil when you’ve had a little bit of wine,” he said, taking the glass from my hands and setting it aside. I feigned shock for having my drink confiscated.

“Really? You’re going to be the controlling boyfriend right now?”

“No, I’m going to be the guy who tries to prevent the worst case of blue balls he’s ever had in his life.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the more you drink, the more you like to torture me apparently and as much I want you to flash me your panties, I’m not exactly sure I can handle seeing that much of you right now.”

I chewed my lip so hard it hurt. “And why not?” I asked, thrilled by the dead seriousness in Mason’s eyes.

“Don’t fucking tease me, little girl. You know exactly why not.”

God. “I do.” I felt a wickedness crawling through me as I chewed my lip. “But for some reason I want you to spell it out for me.”

Mason sneered. “You don’t want that,” he murmured, eyes staring hard ahead at nothing. I hooked my fingers into the neck of his sweater and felt the inaudible groan he let out.

“Why, you don’t think I can handle it?” I challenged. “Tits. Ass. Cock. I know those words, Mason, and I know you think I’m so deeply prissy and vanilla but I’m actually a big girl, so you can go ahead and use them on me,” I said, burning hot and for some reason wanting to feel even hotter. My heart beat faster when Mason turned to me.

“You want it then?” His mutter was raspy and low and his eyes burned so deep into mine I felt paralyzed before he even spoke. “Fine, Taylor,” he whispered, pressing his hand down hard on my thigh. “You walked in here and the first thing I thought of was how goddamned good you looked and how bad I wanted to rip that dress of those perfect tits of yours. I thought about what you’d look like in those boots and those boots alone and it turned me into a bit of a fucking crazy person for a second because I had some very real thoughts about grabbing you, taking you home and fucking you on my bed till I could hear those pretty lips screaming my name. Does

that get the point across or do you want to hear just how hard and deep I imagined my cock inside you?"

Holy fuck.

Just like that, panties ruined.

And suddenly, I was the one who couldn't look Mason in the eye. I stared ahead, breathing jaggedly and trying to figure out how to calm myself down and come back to Earth. But promptly ruining my process was Sofia, who found us at the couches and forced everyone to scoot down for her, which of course had me quickly smashed up against Mason's hard chest, arms around his neck and my skirt riding so high up my bent legs that he actually growled as he yanked it back down this time – and so hard that it brought my deep-V several inches lower on my breasts.

"Fucking Christ, Taylor," he hissed, removing me from his body. "I need to either fuck you now or you need to get far away from me."

I stared, stunned by his words. When my arms fell from around his neck, he let out a hard breath, flashing me an *I didn't mean it that way* look, but it was too late. A disturbed frown pinched my brows as I felt suddenly as cheap and dirty as the diamond on my neck was supposed to make me *not* feel. *What the hell are you doing, Taylor?* I demanded myself before swinging my legs off Mason's lap and getting up. "Restroom?" I asked Noah in a perfectly normal voice so as to thwart attention. When he pointed me in the direction, I turned, avoiding Mason's eyes as I made a beeline back into the penthouse.

What the fuck?

My heart was beating fast as I walked aimlessly inside. I wasn't so much trying to find the bathroom as I was trying to figure out what exactly made me feel like shit just now. *Oh. I know.* Probably the fact that I'd just heard Mason express genuine desire for me for the first time, but it fucking sucked. It essentially translated to, "*If you're not servicing me, you're of no worth to me*," and it made me feel so goddamned stupid for being so openly flirtatious with him tonight. *Why, why did you let Sofia hype you up?* I scolded myself, remembering that Mason Leo was still Mason Leo. He was a man I'd hated for a reason for years, who thought with his dick before all else, and I might actually be insane if I thought that hanging out with me for a week would somehow alter his way of thinking.

"Bathroom's the door next to the mirror."

Jumping, I spun around to find myself facing Whitney. “For God’s sake, what do you want?” I asked, apparently fresh out of fucks to give for the night. She simpered.

“Grabbing a bottle of water. But now I’m just laughing to myself.”

“Well, enjoy.” I turned to go but she stopped me with what she said next.

“I know you haven’t had sex with Mason yet. I could tell even before the weird little exchange you just had on the couch.” She grinned when I stopped to look at her. “See, you can’t even pretend or deny it. You’re obviously with him to get Aaron’s attention, and he obviously gave you that beautiful fucking necklace because he’s hoping to squeeze a lil’ sex out of you before whatever arrangement you have going on is over.” She smiled as she shook the water from her hair, waiting patiently for me to hit back with a retort. But I had nothing. “I mean I can’t blame Mase for being curious about fucking his little brother’s ex. Though honestly, I doubt the taboo of it will make up for your lack of bedroom enthusiasm. Aaron told me all about it,” she said, smirking at the absolute shock frozen on my face.

There was no lack of bedroom enthusiasm – unless Aaron was talking about the few months after the worst time of our lives, which I prayed to God he wasn’t because he knew exactly why I couldn’t bring myself to have sex at that time. I didn’t feel bad about it either, because I was every bit justified and if Aaron had really gone and griped to Whitney about how I was feeling during that time, I was about sure now that I’d murder him once I saw him in St. Lucia.

“Anyway, it’s kind of funny right?” Whitney asked. “Pretty soon you’ll be the only girl who’s been used and dumped by *both* Leo brothers. Impressive, honestly, but also kind of fucking tragic, if you ask me.” Clucking with mock sympathy, Whitney giggled to herself. Then she grabbed a bottle of water and waltzed back out just as Noah came in trashed. Holding a bottle of tequila, he barely registered brushing past Whitney on the way in. But he did stop and notice me, frowning curiously.

“Couldn’t find the bathroom?”

I ignored him. “Can I have some of that?”

He looked down at his half-empty bottle. “Thought you only drank wine.”

I clenched my jaw. “Nope. Wanna pour me a shot?”

His eyes were barely open at this point but he managed a grin and nodded toward the counter. “Why the fuck not? Show me what you got, Simms.”

So one after another, he poured me shots. And one after another, they burned the memories away.

Chapter Ten

If she weren't wasted herself, Sofia would've murdered Noah. But since she was in fact quite wasted, she joined us in the penthouse with an exuberant whoop, knocking back her first round as I did my third. I closed my eyes, shuddering at the liquid scorching my throat and leaving a trail of fire as it trickled down to my chest.

"Are you happy?" Sofia whispered to me in that kid-like voice that came out when she was truly drunk. "Tell me you're happy."

I laughed. "Quite the opposite, but it's okay."

"What? Why?" she gasped with genuine puppy eyes. "You have everything right now! You have that necklace and Mason and *me* and…" She trailed off, oblivious to so much I wished I could just tell her the truth right now – that Mason and I weren't real. Nowhere close. The necklace was purchased half out of the need to legitimize our image and half out of curiosity to fuck me. He was still a prick of a human being yet tragically, he was still much better than his brother, my ex-fiancé who had apparently been secretly bitter and hiding resentment for my lack of libido during the worst time of my life – a time that again, could have been avoided if I could just get that one night back.

But you're an idiot, an idiot, I sang in my head, my chest hot and my head spinning as I let Sofia take my hand and spin me around in a silly dance, our fingers entwined and our heels clacking all over the floor. The room was a carousel around me as I laughed, and when she accidentally let go of me, I yelped only to find myself slamming right into a hard body with strong arms that caught me before I could hit the ground.

"What's going on?" I looked up at my catcher. Mason. Of course. His hard eyes were glued to Noah, who was still pouring shots at the counter. He flicked his stare to Sofia for a second before looking down at me, his look one of concern mixed with anger. "You said you didn't have a tolerance left, Taylor. How much did you just drink?"

"Not a lot," I said defensively.

"But enough!" Sofia cackled. Mason shot her a look but his attention snapped back to me when I wrestled out of his grip. Catching my hand, he pulled me back to him.

"Get her coat for me, Noah," he said. "We're going home."

“Why?” I challenged. “I don’t want to go home, and I certainly don’t want to go home with you.”

“If this is something about your misinterpretation of what I said outside, we can easily clear it up but before we do that, you should probably drink some water and I should probably get you home,” I muttered.

“Misinterpretation?” I ignored the rest of what he said. “I’m not sure exactly how someone can misinterpret the words ‘fuck me or fuck off.’”

“Was that what I said?” Mason glowered, ignoring Sofia’s tipsy plea to be nice.

“Just about.”

Mason lowered his voice. “Look, I don’t know what’s got you acting particularly fucking difficult but if it has anything to do with Whitney or something she might’ve said when she came in here, you should just fucking let it go. She’s petty and immature and she should be nobody to you.”

She’s far from nobody, but you’d know that if you cared to ask.

“Alright, Mason, let’s just drop it, okay? Whatever happens to me or has happened to me is none of your business and you’ve made that clear,” I muttered just as Sofia inserted herself between us.

“Hey, hey, hey. Come on, guys. I don’t know what’s going on but I sense that we all need to just breathe and cool down a bit, right?”

“Yeah, go jump in the pool or something,” Noah said, knocking back another shot. It was a sarcastic suggestion but Sofia gasped as I blinked the tequila burn from my eyes, surprised by the fact that – fuck it, I wanted to do exactly that. I wanted to dive into crystal clear water and just wash this grimy, nasty feeling away. I wanted to sink till I hit rock bottom, found my fresh start and burst back above the surface a brand new woman no longer haunted by Aaron or Whitney or any other demons of my past.

“You can barely stand, let alone swim right now.” Mason pulled me tight with a look of controlled anger on his face. “Listen to me, Taylor. I want to take you home and make sure you’re fine. I want that more than anything right now, okay? So will you fucking let me?”

I stared into his eyes, struck by how earnest he could sound despite the profanity. But then I reminded myself to stop letting him charm me and trick me and fuck my mind up more than it could probably afford anymore.

And before I knew it, I was hand in hand with a whooping Sofia. She was jovial and exuberant and everything I wanted to be as our heeled feet

made their way to the edge of the pool. Mason trailed behind us. I could hear him coming, already regretting his decision to let go of me. His footsteps were faster, more urgent than ours, but we had the head start and the tequila-inspired tunnel vision. We wanted water and that was what we were going to get.

"Taylor!"

Mason's voice was incensed behind me but it was too late because my feet had left the ground. I gasped and squeezed my eyes shut, and I heard the collective cheer of the crowd around us before the incredible splash. Then there was total blissful silence. My skin stung and my eyes closed as I floated, my arms out at my sides. I felt Sofia's fingertips brushing against mine. I tickled them back. I pretended for as long as I was submerged that I was nothing but happy, and I didn't actually live a life of mostly embarrassment and suffocating regret. I wanted to imagine a different childhood too, but there was a crescendo of voices that grew from above, and I felt the lack of air expanding my chest and creeping up my throat till my lips broke wide open, letting water flood in a second before I burst back to the surface with a gasp.

"Oh my God!" Sofia burst into breathless laughter as her hands found mine. Fingers entwined and heads bobbing above water, our eyes found Mason as he stared down at just me. "Oh shit, he took his shoes off," Sofia whispered with a giggle as I realized that Mason had been a second from coming in after me. Maybe I looked drunk enough to forget how to swim. Maybe he thought diamonds melted in chlorine. Whatever it was, I was surprised, blinking water from my lashes, letting the tension build between us as I continued staring up at him.

When it was finally time to get out, it was Noah who grabbed our hands and pulled us back onto ground. I ignored the heat of Mason's stare from where he sat now, giving no attention to the grins and nudges of other guys who were now watching me and Sofia walk around like dual winners of the wettest T-shirt contest on Earth.

"You're in trouble now," Sofia sang, covering her mouth. "And I'm only laughing because that's my bad habit when I'm drunk and nerv – *oop!*" Toppling in her heels, she took me down with her. I gasped but snorted hard once I hit the ground on my ass, finally lost in my stupor, my mind almost as blank as I wanted to be. A dozen guys were rushing forward to help us up now, and I knew the kindness had every bit to do with my soaking

cleavage but I didn't care. I let them help us up and catch me when I gasped again, processing the pain in the ankle I'd twisted during my fall.

But then I heard footsteps and the second Mason's voice said, "I've got it," the other hands fell away and before I knew what was happening, I was being lifted off the floor. Playful whistles followed Mason as he scooped me up and took me away from the pool, carrying me like a feather despite my soaking wet everything. *Gross*. I felt the squishiness in my thigh-high boots and longed immediately to strip them off my legs. Luckily, Noah was already leading us to the guest rooms to get cleaned up and changed.

Downstairs, despite Sofia's insistence that she change in the same room as me, Noah dragged her to a separate one, making her giggle by saying, "The grown-ups need to talk." Then he exchanged a look with Mason before leaving him alone in a room with me.

The second the door closed behind us, I found myself feeling painfully sober.

I was alone with Mason. Soaking wet, pissed and alone with the six feet and two inches of hard fury standing silently before me. My throat tightened as I took him in, looking like a warrior. His shoulders broadened and his muscles strained against his V-neck with every breath he took in. He set me right on fire with his stare, his steely eyes starting at the tips of my boots before dragging up my legs inch by inch. I could see his fury mix with desire as his gaze traveled up my stomach to my chest, settling on the diamond still sitting peacefully on my chest as if nothing even happened. Reaching between my breasts, I touched the stone.

"Why did you even buy it for me?" The question came out suddenly, without me realizing. It hung in the air as Mason gave himself another second to stare at my wet skin.

"To make you feel good."

"What kind of good?"

"The kind that reminds you that you should never feel disposable. Or used."

I swallowed at the rasp in his voice. I knew what I wanted to ask next but I wasn't sure if I had the guts. There was another long, thick silence before I mustered up the courage. "Are you just trying to fuck me?"

Mason paused. "Is that why you think I bought the diamond?"

"Yes."

Eyes glinting, a sneer curled his lips. “Of course,” he muttered bitterly. “You’re as irrational as you are fucking impossible to please.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He ignored me. “Take your dress off. You’ll get sick.”

“Turn around,” I said impatiently. When he did, I glared at the sculpted V of his back, furious as I peeled my dress off my body. “Tell me what the hell you meant.”

From the back, I could see him running his hand over his jaw. “What do you think, Taylor?” There was gravel and disdain in his voice. “You don’t see rationally when it comes to me. You never have. No matter what I do, I’m the bad guy, but aside from the fact that I have a dick and like sex, I’m actually kind of fucking lost on what I ever did to you.”

I stared at the back of his head, my jumble of angry thoughts and bottled memories piecing into an answer. “‘Put yourself out of your misery,’” I hissed, shoving the ring of soaked cotton down my waist and off my hips. “I heard you say it to Aaron at his birthday party, Mase. Two years ago. He was miserable, he just got passed up for a promotion at work and he pulled you aside. I was around the corner when you told him he could be fucking any woman he wanted if he just ended it with me. If he just *put himself out of his misery*.” Fresh tears stung my eyes and my voice was shaking but I forced myself to go on. “And guess what? He asked for a break the next week and during that break, he came an inch from cheating on me with Whitney Decker, a girl who is one of a million reasons I wish I could rewind my life to before that fucking break because everything was fine before it happened and then after, everything was shit. Everything was pain and regret and confusion – is that explanation enough for you?” I demanded furiously, my emotions on such a high that I didn’t flinch when Mason turned around. I didn’t move as I stood there in a soaked bra and panties, my dress puddled at my heeled feet, because his blazing eyes were nowhere on my body – they locked intensely on my stare as it challenged him to somehow explain himself.

“For Christ’s sake, Taylor, it wasn’t unprompted.”

“*What* wasn’t?”

“What you heard that night. I said it only because Aaron was bitching to me for weeks by that point about how he made a mistake. How settling down so fast made him realize how much pussy was still out there. He was the only person standing in his way of being single but if he wanted to fuck

things up, I told him to go fucking ahead. To get it over with if he really wanted to get rid of the best thing he had going. And I'm guessing those were the crucial words you didn't hear that night. All that said I didn't cause your damned break, Taylor. I didn't cause all the problems that happened during your break and whatever they were, I didn't cause the ones that happened after so maybe it's time to stop using me as a fucking scapegoat," Mason hissed, taking a heavy step forward. "And while we're getting things straight here, let me tell you again that I didn't buy that necklace to get you in bed. I'm not trying to fuck you. Don't get me wrong, I want to. I've wanted to for a long goddamned while and I've pictured you in bed more times than you want to imagine but trust me, if I was trying to *fuck* you, Taylor, you'd know it," Mason growled, the heat of his words coating my skin. "Now are there any other assumptions you've made about me that you'd like disputed or are we fucking done here?"

I wet my lips, the air in the room feeling too thick to breathe.

Shit.

Shit, hell, fuck.

I should've known. I really should've. Considering I was hardly surprised to hear it now, I should have at least suspected that Aaron was the bigger monster all along. The whole time, the man I forced myself to believe was so perfect was actually still talking to Whitney when he said he wasn't. He was complaining about me during the worst pain of my life and apparently, he had never stopped wondering about all the "pussy that was still out there." But I let myself stay blind because I thought I needed him then. I thought I owed him, so I held on.

And all for this.

"I'm done," I finally said, my throat tight, my chest weighed in shame as I thought about that one conversation – that one stupid, incomplete memory that had skewed my every future impression of Mason. My mouth opened and closed as I tried to find my apology but nothing came so I simply murmured, "I'm sorry."

But with just two words, something shifted between us. The air was breathable now but my breath was ragged as I watched Mason slowly come down from his rage – at least enough to notice my wet, heaving breasts in just a lace bra before him. An ache pulsed between my thighs as I watched desire mix with fury on his face as he stared me down.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I was wrong and I’m sure I was irrational,” I whispered, pushing my wet hair off my shoulders and meeting his eye. “But I don’t think I’m that hard to please.”

He lifted his eyes to me. “Is that right?” The huskiness of his voice prickled over my skin. I breathed out hard and with a lust I knew he heard because suddenly he moved in so close my breasts were just pressed against his hard body. “You asking me to try?” My lip quivered as he hooked a finger into my panties. “Say the word and I’ll give you every pleasure Aaron never came close to giving you. I’ll make your pussy wetter than it’s ever been in your life.”

My pulse was hammering, my breaths shaky as a result. But I forced myself to speak. “Do it.”

I’d barely answered before Mason crushed his mouth over mine, tearing down the cups of my bra and molding his hands over my breasts. He squeezed mercilessly as he swept his tongue through me, along every corner of my mouth, sparking blasts of heat throughout my shivering body. But as quickly as he kissed me, he pulled away, pinning his eyes to mine as he murmured, “Turn around for me.”

Breathless, I obliged, staring down the length of the bed as I felt Mason sink to a crouch behind me. As he unzipped my boots and peeled them off my legs, I felt his breath travel up my inner thighs. That alone felt so good I could hardly stand. “Step out,” Mason murmured. Again, I did as I was told and heard my heavy heels set aside on the hardwood floor before Mason spoke again. “Bend over for me.”

My hands slid up the silk sheets as I bent over the bed, my mouth parting wider as I felt his fingers pull down my panties. I squeezed handfuls of sheets as I stepped out of my panties, feeling the air hit my most sensitive parts already throbbing with need. I was so exposed, so incredibly vulnerable and to a man I was sure I hated five minutes ago.

“You’re fucking perfect,” Mason murmured, his voice a mixture of filthy lust and pure awe. “You’re so fucking wet.”

I nodded eagerly, a desperate sound pleading from my lips. My fists pulsed around the silk as I waited for him, anticipation thrumming like flames under my skin – until slowly, slowly I felt the heat of Mason’s breath on my sex.

The first lick arched my back hard. “*Oh God*,” I moaned, pulling the sheets. I pulled sharper with the second lick – this one longer, wetter and

more torturous than the last. “Please keep going, Mase, please don’t stop,” I begged breathlessly.

“I haven’t started,” he murmured against my pussy, his hands squeezing up the backs of my thighs, grabbing handfuls of my ass and spreading me further apart. My toes curled against the hardwood as he made me wait another second for his tongue. With a whimper, I writhed against the sheets. I could still feel his breath hot against me so I arched my back further for him, spreading my legs wider, silently begging him to lick me again.

The second I lost hope he squeezed my ass and plunged his tongue deep into my pussy.

“Mason!” I gasped, hugging silk to my breasts as he laved against me, greediness in his pace as he licked me, coaxing every drop of my arousal onto that wicked tongue. *Holy fucking shit.* I couldn’t believe the sensation surging my body as I lay on my stomach for Mason, giving him full control and letting him tunnel inside me so deep I could hardly breathe.

Lapping at me, Mason groaned. Filling the room was the filthy, wet sound of his tongue pleasuring me, unraveling me, making me feel as incredibly fucking good as he promised. I was in such a state of bliss I barely processed his strong arms moving my body, pushing me up the bed and kissing along my hipbones as he turned me over onto my back.

My eyes caught on his intense stare before my jaw dropped at the sight of his erection. It was snaked down one leg and pulsing thick against his jeans. But I got only a glimpse before Mason spread my legs and lifted them over his shoulders. Leaning forward between my legs, he wet his lips, taking me in from this new angle before pressing his tongue over my clit. I gasped as a shock of pleasure rippled through me.

“Tell me how good you feel,” Mason growled, licking slowly, gently as he waited to hear me.

“Please, Mase,” I writhed, thrusting my hips forward and arching my back in a hot desperation to feel his tongue again. “It feels too good. I can’t take it if you stop again.”

“Keep doing that,” he growled as I squeezed my breasts, watching me, drinking me in for another second before sliding his hands under my ass and lifting me up to his mouth. As his hot tongue rolled up and down the length of my pussy, I cried up to the ceiling, yanking the sheets clean off the bed. The moans that ripped from my throat made him groan against me,

sending a delicious hum over my clit and straight to my core. It felt so good now I could barely take it anymore. I writhed on the bed, practically wrestling under Mason, making him fight against me. And with pleasure he did, rumbling against my pussy as he hugged my thighs against to shoulders, pinning me down with this tongue and sucking my clit till an orgasm erupted from the base of my spine. Still holding me tight, Mason absorbed my every shock and spasm. He growled with thick arousal once I was done, kneeling over me and groping my breast as he buried his mouth into my neck.

Closing my eyes, I reveled in the afterglow of the unbelievable pleasure he'd just shown me – with just his fucking tongue. It felt like I took forever as I lay there, recovering, processing. *Holy fucking shit*, I panted hard, realizing that I'd jut had my first orgasm since Aaron left me and it had come at the hands of his older brother.

Rather, his mouth – that smart fucking mouth that only ever gave me sarcasm and rudeness had just brought me to an orgasm so mind-numbingly good I could barely think.

Good God, Taylor…

I couldn't handle the reality of what just happened or the fact that I didn't regret one wet second of it, so I gave myself a break and let my mind drift into oblivion. For once, I wasn't analyzing. I wasn't even thinking anymore. But I did remember laughing softly as Mason eventually pulled the dry change of clothes over my limp body. Then without a single person noticing, we slipped out of the party.

Chapter Eleven

I knew before I opened my eyes the next morning that I was in Mason's bed. It obviously wasn't my own. For starters, I'd been sleeping on a couch for months, but that much aside, the sheets wrapped around me were just softer, thicker and plusher than anything I could afford. They screamed luxury, and I stayed wrapped in them a little longer, listening to the sound of Mason's shower running in his bathroom. I took comfort in the soft rainfall – mostly because I couldn't believe he was still here.

We didn't have sex last night. Considering that, I half-expected that he'd go into work early and leave a note detailing how I should see myself out. I had actually woken in the night dreading the moment, especially since he was sleeping away from me on the bed, breathtakingly stretched out on his back with one arm up and the other resting over his abs. In my bleary half-sleep, I actually thought, "*Imagine waking up to that,*" and then realized I wouldn't. At that point, I told myself to just see myself out, but my body was melting into his foam mattress and there was still heavenly sleep steeped in my bones. So I thought *fuck it* and decided to enjoy the best slumber of my life before dealing with my next episode of Mason-related fury in a few hours.

But when I finally stirred in the morning, it was because he'd rolled out of bed. Facing away from him, my eyes still closed, I waited to hear the metal clinking of watches and cufflinks – Mason dressing in a rush before walking out the door. But instead, I heard the simple sound of him breathing in deep as he sat at the edge of the bed, and then the ridiculously sexy sound of him letting that breath out. Turning off his alarm, he set his phone gingerly back on the nightstand, sliding it slowly, carefully onto the surface. *Is he…?* He was being quiet for me. It was a teeny tiny gesture but somehow it felt huge, and I couldn't help grinning. My lips only curved wider as I heard him stretch, groan softly and then walk into his bathroom, shutting the door with the same soft touch that he'd rest his phone with.

When I finally did open my eyes, I scanned the nearby surfaces for a note, a sign of any sort that I was expected gone by the time he finished showering. None. I looked for my phone to text Sofia, but it was nowhere in sight so at that point, I let myself take in the impressive master bedroom of Mason Leo's apartment. The room was soaked in sun and perfectly bright

despite accents of mostly black and charcoal. Behind me was a tufted leather headboard I guessed was half the size of my studio, and surrounding me were three walls of floor-to-ceiling windows boasting views of blue sky behind the glittering Freedom Tower.

Seriously. Imagine waking up to this every morning, I thought again, fully awake this time.

By the time I heard the shower turn off, I was sitting up in bed. And despite his consideration of me as I slept, I was still nervous to face Mason this morning. Last night had ended fine but now that I thought about it, there were some hiccups that made me shudder.

Upon leaving Noah's apartment, Mason had brought me to his and after running me a shower in the guest bathroom, he'd pulled me into his chest by the waist of my leggings. Running a hand down the curve of my ass, he pressed his lips to mine and squeezed, his fingertips just grazing my pussy. But when I moaned, he pulled back and laughed.

"Don't make those sounds."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't need to get any harder."

Selfishly, I wanted him to. I couldn't help wanting to touch Mason, to feel my hands wrapped around his erection. But when I reached between our bodies, he swiftly stopped me before my fingers made contact and with a call from Noah buzzing on his phone, he told me to shower and left. By the time I got out, he was still on the phone. But he put the conversation on hold for a moment to tell me to go upstairs and sleep in his bedroom. And as much as I wanted to stay up and get some kind of answer for what just happened between us, I was minutes from passing out, so I went ahead and slept.

I felt him join the bed two hours later and to my dismay, he didn't touch me. He didn't come near me, and so I was convinced that by the time I woke up, I'd be alone. And I was right. I did wake up alone.

But not quite as I'd imagined.

"Morning."

Mother of God.

I felt like a queen the second Mason came out of the bathroom. Leaning against a cloud of pillows in a sea of buttery silk, I turned to find him walking toward me like a Greek god walking earth. I had to bite my lip as I took in the plush, white towel knotted low on hipbones that screamed

sex. I couldn't even help my eyes as they traveled up each perfectly defined section of the six-pack that looked even better than it did in my imagination. Lord. I'd never ogled someone so blatantly in my life but it really couldn't be helped with a man who looked like Mason Leo – especially not when he was greeting me with that sexy, crooked smile.

"Morning," I returned in a murmur, treating myself to every slanted cut of muscle in his back as he grabbed boxers from his dresser.

"Sleep well?"

"Yes," I replied as he disappeared into his closet. The neat sound of a zipper pulled up let me know he was changing, so I took the time to breathe and try to mimic his nonchalance. But when he emerged still shirtless in belted black pants, I nearly lost my breath again. He observed me for a second then asked point blank, "Why are you nervous?"

My eyes fluttered. Feeling exposed, I hugged the sheets to my chest. "Um… I don't know, Mason," I laughed curtly. "Can't you guess?"

"I'll move past our little spat last night and guess that it's something to do with the events that took place after. After you got out of the pool."

"Warmer," I said, watching his bicep twitch as he dried his hair. Mason smirked.

"Alright. Then is it the fact that my tongue made you come harder than Aaron's ever made you come in your life?" He peered up from his towel to catch my frozen expression. "Oh yeah, I think I nailed it. Still not sure what the nervous Bambi eyes are about though."

I was incredulous. "Really? You just said it. It's that whatever line there was between us… we crossed it last night. Hard."

"And do you regret it?"

I looked up at his gleaming eyes. "No," I replied sooner than I meant to. I hugged the sheets harder to my breast as I countered. "Do you?" For all I knew, the silence that passed spanned three seconds but to me it felt like half an eternity.

"No," Mason finally said.

I nodded despite doubt crawling through me. "Then…" I remembered our moment in the bathroom, when I'd wanted to return the favor to Mason only to have my offer declined. In my exhaustion, the rejection hadn't fully sunk in last night but this morning, it made my face heat right up. "Why wouldn't you…"

“Let you repay me?” Mason cocked his eyebrow. “Considering you thought I was trying to buy sex from you twelve hours ago, I wanted to keep things crystal clear,” Mason said, glancing up at me. He looked almost irked by the skepticism pinching my brow. “Hard for you to believe?”

“Yes?”

“Why?”

“Probably because I know too much about your sexual appetite and because I saw how hard you were at Noah’s house. And I almost felt it how hard you were downstairs last night, before I showered.” I forced myself not to be intimidated by his gaze pinned on me as he crossed the length of his room to reach his other dresser. “I guess I just have trouble believing that you’d deprive yourself of pleasure just to give me reassurance.”

I watched his back as he opened a drawer. “I don’t deprive myself of pleasure.”

“Is that your way of telling me you had girls over while I was passed out last night?”

“Is that your way of asking me whether I’ve slept with anyone since we started this arrangement?”

Ah. There was that smug tone I hadn’t heard in a whole day. Chewing my lip, I tried to sound blithe. “I’ll admit I’m curious.”

Fastening silver cufflinks, Mason turned to face me. “I haven’t slept with anyone since the day I came into your apartment. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t require sex every three hours.” A faint smile rose to his lips. “It’s also not my first time meeting you, Taylor. I’ve known you for three years, I know the level of respect you deserve and require, and I’m well aware that you’d be uncomfortable with the idea of playing my girlfriend while I slept with other women. And considering your issues with me thus far have already been plentiful, I figured I wouldn’t give you one more thing to harp about.”

“Wow. That was almost sweet until the end.”

He smirked. “You should never get your hopes up with me.”

“Guess not,” I laughed though the statement stuck to me, putting an uneasy feeling in my stomach as I brushed my teeth in his bathroom. But when I came out, Mason was fully dressed in a grey suit and tie, and with a hand on my back and a nod out the door, he walked with me downstairs.

“I have to rush to work but we can fit some coffee,” he said as he straightened his tie. And so I sat at the counter of the open kitchen, gazing

down onto Mercer Street as Mason made what I thought was two Americanos. I cocked my head when he turned from the espresso machine with just one, sliding it across the island toward me.

"None for you?"

"Not this morning. I have a lunch with the trust of the Tate Building in thirty minutes."

"So, you're telling me you just delayed your morning to make me coffee."

"I wouldn't think I'd have to tell you considering you just saw it happen," Mason said. "I do have to go now but you're welcome to stay here."

I veiled my surprise by the offer. "I'll go at some point. I need to change into my own clothing. Pretty sure whatever I'm wearing belongs to an ex of Noah's."

"Fair enough." Mason turned away from me as he grabbed his coat off the back of his chair. "Your necklace is on the living room table. Make sure to take it before you leave."

"I will," I said, a jitteriness in my bones. I knew he had to leave but I wished badly for another ten minutes to lead the conversation back to last night – specifically into the fact that I *wanted* to return the favor. I wanted to show Mason pleasure and I hated that I had doubts about whether he cared to receive it. He had been perfectly gracious with me this morning but I still found multiple things to be bothered by. His eyes didn't burn into me the way they had last night. He hadn't flirted much and now he wasn't looking at me at all. Our lack of eye contact approached two minutes now as he tucked a folder into his black briefcase and zipped it up. "When will I see you again?" I asked, my pulse jumping when those blue eyes found mine again.

"I'll have to see," came his answer, prompting the wave of disappointment to crash in my chest. "Do you want me to have a car available for when you leave?" Again, he wasn't looking at me.

"I'm fine, thanks," I said evenly, despite my brain racing to think of any last-minute ways to bring up last night. Because I refused to spend the rest of my day frantically overanalyzing every second from this morning, including Mason's exit toward the door without another word spoken to me.

Fuck it.

I sat only a second in my chair before getting up to follow Mason. My heart beat fast as I stared at his elegant silhouette standing before the elevator in that perfectly tapered suit. “Mase.” His name breathed softly from my lips and when he turned around, I fought past the nerves that came with his handsome frown. Closing in on him, I touched his chest, my other hand grabbing his and sliding it beneath my sweater. I molded it to my naked breast, squeezing hard till he groaned against the kiss I pressed to his lips. One flick of tongue and our pace picked up. A rumble escaping Mason’s chest, he pushed my shirt up, fondling me roughly, a grunt tearing from his throat as he thrust me up against the wall. I gasped as I felt his tongue flick hot over my nipple – just a second before the elevator opened beside us and prompted his throaty growl.

“*Fuck*, Taylor.” Panting hard, Mason pulled away from me. There was torture in his eyes and his fingers dug into my waist. But then he groaned and buried his face in my neck and gave a tormented laugh. “This is the hard-on I was hoping to avoid before work,” he muttered, relieving and guilting me in one shot. When he drew back, I sucked in my bottom lip at the look of torture on his face. He shook his head at me, a brief silence passing before he said, “I’m late.” Retrieving his suitcase from the ground, Mason nodded for me to follow him to the elevator and as he stepped inside, I stood in its frame. I watched in awe as he leaned forward to kiss my lips gently, stepping back a second before the heavy doors glided shut to leave me alone in his penthouse, stunned and utterly breathless.

Chapter Twelve

I was beyond glad I was off work because the rest of my day was spent thinking nonstop about Mason. I found myself craving the sound of his voice, the smell of his skin. My brain refused to stop reliving the events of last night at Noah's house. I relished it like my favorite scene in a movie, rewinding and replaying, over and over so I couldn't be confused for even a second that it had all been a dream.

It was an insanely girly thing to do, and I couldn't believe myself but I'd also stopped trying to understand what was going on. I was beyond the point of trying to make sense of this – of Mason and me. All I knew was that it felt good. Better than good – like the breathless, exciting, heart-skipping-a-beat kind of romance I'd fantasized about in high school but long concluded wasn't actually real. Feeling *this* sexy, pleasured and satisfied was something straight out of Hollywood – that was what I told myself.

Till last night and this morning, at least.

Thanks to that inexplicably sweet kiss at his elevator, I just about sighed throughout the rest of my day, feeling as if I were floating several inches off the ground. I read a few chapters of the book I started four months ago, got my nails done and went window shopping for shoes. I strolled around aimlessly, burning through every playlist on my phone and at the end of the night, enjoyed a solo glass of wine with charcuterie in the window of a French Bistro on Broadway. By 8PM, I was sure I was maxed out on content and thoroughly done for the night. But then Mason called.

"What are you doing?" he asked when I picked up the phone. Unless I imagined it, there was a smile in his voice.

"I had a treat yourself kind of day," I replied, trailing my finger along the fine edge of my glass.

"Sounds nice."

"How was your day?" I asked, laughing inwardly at how weirdly normal our conversation sounded for once.

"Not bad, but a little long considering how it started," Mason answered. "Girl I had over last night left me in a bad way before sending me off to work. Really could've used a cold shower before going to my

meeting, but I was already running late." That low and buttery laugh of his sent a chill up my arms. "Know anything about that?"

I grinned like an idiot, tousling my hair as I gazed out the window. "I may. Sorry, by the way."

"No need to apologize. Just come meet me for dinner."

I blinked. "Oh, sure." I pushed the charcuterie plate away, surprising myself with how quickly I turned to signal my waiter for the check. "Where should I meet you?"

"I'm not sure yet. Just tell me where you are so I can send my driver to get you."

"I'm in the Upper West Side. By Lincoln Center."

"Text me the exact address and I'll have a car there within ten minutes."

"Done."

When we hung up, I hastily texted him the address of the bistro and settled up my bill. I sucked in my bottom lip, trying to contain my excitement but the effort was in vain, so I gave up to bundle up, stepping outside with a big, stupid smile hidden behind my scarf as I spotted the black Mercedes pulling up to deliver me to Mason.

* * *

Upon arriving downtown at the Victorian Hotel, I gave my name up front to be escorted to the very top of the building, into the sleek, swanky lounge. It was packed and buzzing inside, cocktail waitresses drifting about in half bouffants, winged eyeliner and ivory silk shift dresses. There was a retro feel to the place, especially with swinging jazz echoing beyond the din of conversation, and vintage, chandelier sconces dimly lighting the room.

"Mr. Leo is waiting for you upstairs, miss," said the suited gentleman who brought me into the bar. Leading the way, I followed him to a flight of roped-off stairs that he let me up before closing off again. Alone now, I made my way up the marble steps, approaching a room overlooking the one I'd just come from. There was an ornate wrought iron balcony that reminded me of a sheet of lace. Once I got to the top of the steps, I saw a cozy but sophisticated space furnished with a fully stocked bar, a hanging candelabra and a sprawling leather couch on which my favorite part of the room sat.

He hadn’t noticed me yet.

A silver pen in the easy grip of his left hand, Mason jotted in a small planner, failing thus far to look up and greet me. I didn’t mind. It gave me time to study him without his knowledge, which I’d come to realize was something I loved to do. It meant I got to see him without the jokes and the snark and the sarcasm that seemed inevitable the moment he laid eyes upon me. It also meant I could stand there for a moment and secretly admire how devastatingly beautiful he was in a simple white shirt with no tie, his suit jacket off and draped over the back of the couch. They were broad already, but his perfect shoulders broadened further from the way he leaned forward on his knees. Sitting perfectly straight yet at ease, he was a winning combination of authority and nonchalance that had me pretty furiously turned on.

“Hey.”

When his finally greeting came, it was with a glimmer in his eyes and an easy smile on his lips. “Hi,” I breathed, watching him rise to his feet and come to take my coat. Once it was hung on the rack, his hand found the small of my back and he led me to the couch. On the table in front of us, there was already a spread of risotto and scallops on the shell, served on a wooden cutting board. His glass of red was reaching its end so after pouring mine, he refilled it. Handing it to me, he laughed.

“Don’t worry, you don’t need to drink or finish it. Just seemed rude if I didn’t pour you a glass.”

“Ah, so you’re actually concerned with seeming rude now,” I teased but quickly relented. “I’m joking. You more than cleared up everything last night at Noah’s. And I guess this morning as well.”

He smirked at my references to the past twenty-four hours we had. But when he spoke, his voice was a genuine murmur. “I’m glad I got to see you tonight.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Me too. I…” Did I dare say it? I bit my lip. “I thought about you a… decent amount today,” I laughed sheepishly.

“I doubt it was anything compared to how much I thought about you,” Mason said. He laughed. “I’m actually behind on my work now thanks to the lack of thinking with my brain all day.

“Really?” I wet my lips, gazing down at my crossed legs grazing Mason’s, my body angled toward him so I could feel his warmth. “Well, you have three more days before we leave for St. Lucia.”

Mason nodded. “And once I get back I’ll have to break the news to the company that run this bar that I’m not renewing their contract.”

My lashes fluttered. “Right. Because you’re going to give this space to Vandermark,” I murmured, remembering the contract with my company Mason promised. It was the only reason Lori gave me the two weeks off out of nowhere. “That deal is going to make me look like a rock star at work, by the way. I mean it’s easily a thousand times bigger than any other contract I’ve ever negotiated, and there have been a lot.”

“Yeah? How long have you worked at Vandermark?”

“Since I was nineteen, so seven years now.”

Mason raised his eyebrows high. “Right. You didn’t go to college.” He took a moment to remember the fact that so thoroughly shocked him a couple days ago. “So, how the hell did you land a spot at that company fresh out of high school?” he asked with a curiosity that flattered me. But I struggled to figure out how to answer.

“It’s a little hard to explain,” I laughed quietly, letting myself remember. “I’d have to go way back to where I grew up and how high school went for me. Kind of a long story, so.”

Mason glanced at his watch. “Well, they close in two hours here but you and I have all night. We can stay till the morning if we want, so if you’re willing to tell me, I’d be more than happy to listen.”

I looked up at him, surprised by the honesty in his eyes. No a single glint of a laugh or a joke. I bit my lip. “Sure,” I said, failing to sound unfazed. “I guess it starts with, um, getting shuffled around a bit when I was a kid.”

“Where did you grow up?”

“Vermont. Super blue-collar town in Bennington County. I’d say the name but you haven’t heard of it, and it’s nothing to know about anyway,” I smiled a bit sheepishly. “And I didn’t stay there long. It was just the last place I lived with my mom before she sent me off to some poor relative who really couldn’t afford me more than she could.” I looked up to catch Mason’s reaction to the fact that I hadn’t grown up in the upper middle class dream that people always assumed I came from. I expected to see him wrinkle his nose a bit like Aaron had when he heard I’d once lived in a trailer home. But there was nothing of that kind of expression, no flinch at all in any of Mason’s perfectly symmetrical features. All he did was nod and keep his attention fixed gently on me so I’d continue talking. “Anyway,

I bounced around to other relatives before she got someone to take me in for good. It was nice because I got to spend my high school years in White River Junction, which is a small town where you kind of have to make your own entertainment, but it was a good community. It made up for the fact that I was with Aunt Joy, whose name I think was… some kind of cruel joke," I laughed to myself, quiet as I thought for the first time in ages about the woman who used to spend entire days chain smoking in the living room and watching all the conspiracy theory documentaries Netflix had to offer. "She worked part-time at the grocery store before I moved in but once I came around, she quit and made me pay seven hundred dollars a month in rent and utilities… which for a fifteen-year-old was kind of difficult. But if I didn't, I had nowhere else to go."

Mason frowned. "So you managed to do that?"

I took a sip of my wine, letting the bitter tannins coat my tongue. "With two jobs after school. Didn't leave much room for a social life but at least I got to fantasize a lot about how I was going to leave the second I graduated. Which is exactly what I did."

"Pretty fucking impressive." Mason nodded with approval. "Especially considering you moved straight to one of the most expensive cities in the country."

I blushed. "Trust me, it probably wasn't the smartest move, and I struggled for awhile to get a job. No one wants to hire you in New York unless you have New York experience, but you can't get New York experience unless someone hires you. It was definitely a struggle, and I wouldn't have found anything if it weren't for my math teacher from high school. She was the one who'd see me walking into her homeroom like a zombie because I could never start studying till I got home from work, and considering I had to go several towns over to find my second job, that wasn't till ten, eleven at night. So she was the one who helped me make a template so I could know how much to set aside and save for myself so I could move." I shook my head at myself, holding my wine glass against my bottom lip as I thought about how bullheaded and foolish I was as a kid. "She tried so hard to convince me to go somewhere besides New York, but I was so young and dumb and I'd watched so many movies where I saw Fifth Avenue or the Empire State Building. And I was just set in my mind, so when I graduated, I came here and floundered cluelessly for about eight months till I was almost out of money."

Mason had a hand thrust in his hair as he processed my story thus far. “I can’t believe this is you. I don’t know why, but I just assumed you’d started out differently here.”

“I know. I can’t believe either when I think about it. I used to survive on peanut butter or grilled cheeses all week, so it definitely feels like I’ve come pretty far,” I said quietly.

Mason shook his head, looking stunned. “You have and you should be proud. You did it all on your own.”

“Well. Not quite,” I admitted. “I called my math teacher when I was back to unemployed and wondering if I could really make it in this city. She could hear the desperation in my voice, so she wound up calling…” I squinted. “I believe it was her mother-in-law’s church friend’s *goddaughter*…” I laughed at Mason’s face of pure astonishment. “I know. She called that person to see if she’d be willing to give me an internship. And from what I understand, she called her every week for two months until she gave in and contacted me for an interview at this crazy famous restaurant group I couldn’t believe I even had a connection to. And even crazier than that, I actually got hired. I started as a paid intern and it took two years to become an assistant, and then another two before I became an official event coordinator for Vandermark Restaurants.”

Mason was grinning at the improbability of my story. “Fuck. That title at the age of twenty-three is pretty unbelievable,” he said, putting a glow on my face. “And the fact that this woman believed so fiercely in you certainly says something about what a hard worker you were from the start.”

“I hope so,” I nodded, smiling to myself. “Her name is Lori.”

“Your teacher?”

“No, the woman who hired me to Vandermark. I consider her one of my best friends now, too,” I said, thinking guiltily about how I hadn’t updated Lori at all regarding my “fauxmance” with Mason. But now there was so much to explain that I figured I’d just wait till I got back to work.

“That’s amazing,” Mason remarked, his blue eyes glimmering as they traced the pride curving the edges of my lips. “What was your teacher’s name?”

My smile faltered a bit. “It’s going to sound weird, but I don’t really like saying her name aloud.”

Mason looked confused. “Why?” he asked.

“Um… hard to explain but I’ll just say it. It’s Mrs. Nolan.”

“Is she still here? Why is it hard for you to say?”

“She’s still here. In her early sixties now. But I just don’t like mentioning her name and I’m kind of begging you to avoid it from here on out, too,” I murmured hastily, feeling like a crazy person. I knew Mason was curious to press on about the reasons for my restrictions, but all I had to do was flash him a bit of a pleading look and with a nod, he mercifully dropped it, changing the subject.

“Can I make you a plate?” he asked, gesturing toward the food.

“I’m okay for now. But you can answer me a question,” I replied.

“What is it?”

I brainstormed. “I don’t know. I have to think of one. I just figure you owe me some stories from your own life considering how much you just heard about mine.”

Mason smiled. “Fair enough. What do you want to know?”

“Let’s start with how you grew up. I know a little from Aaron, though,” I smiled, taking a baby sip of my wine. “Born and raised in New York. Grew up in the Upper West Side. You went to the Wharton School of Business and then Columbia for your masters.”

Mason raised his eyebrows. “That’s more than I figured you’d know.”

“You seem to underestimate your little brother’s obsession with you.”

“No, we’re all been well versed on Aaron’s jealousy issues. I just didn’t think he’d subject you to them,” Mason laughed.

“Who’s ‘we’?” I asked, letting him pull my legging-clad legs onto his lap. “You and your parents?”

“Yes. Specifically me and my mother. You’ve met her.”

“Of course.” Clara Leo, born Clara Alba. She was an shockingly beautiful, sweet, and naturally doting woman who I had the pleasure of seeing only once a year during Thanksgiving. And every Thanksgiving, she begged Aaron and me to come to Christmas, often trying to bribe us with everything from delicious home baked pastries to expensive gifts. She’d say that was only the start if we’d just come to see her on Christmas as well, but Aaron always said we’d already committed to a friend’s party, whether it was true or not. And soon enough, I was conditioned to love but dread Thanksgiving because I knew it was that time of the year when Aaron and I would disappoint poor Clara. From what I observed, there was nothing not to love about her, so it broke my heart in half. “She’s gotta be the most loving woman I’ve ever met in my life,” I said truthfully. “I wish Aaron

would've wanted to spend more time with her, but he had a… slight resentment about how she favored you."

"You're kidding," Mason laughed straightaway, though I could tell he found nothing funny at all. I cocked my head curiously as he took a minute to process what I'd just said. The grip he hand on my knee firmed a bit as he shook his head. "That's… insane. Aaron knows he's our mother's weakness. She's incredibly proud of me but she's always spent most of her time worrying about him, making sure he's happy and taken care of – especially since she knows he's got this weird fucking complex about being the kid brother."

"I don't know if it's a kid brother complex so much as the 'less successful brother' complex," I said, annoyed as I thought about it. "He felt like your dad didn't respect him, and like your mother pitied him."

"Fuck him," Mason seethed, staring straight ahead. "He punished her for years just for loving him as much as she did. She cried every day for weeks after he left for California," he revealed, promptly breaking my heart again. I had barely considered that anyone was suffering as much as I was thanks to Aaron, but now that I thought about it, I couldn't believe I'd forgotten about Clara and how much she had to be hurting. "I know if he really ends up marrying Eva, we'll completely lose him to the Tully family. He'll never come home to so much as visit and within a few years, he'll probably get comfortable with not calling my mother, not even on holidays. And considering how she's spent her entire life just giving to us, how much bullshit she's accepted from my father just for us, I won't let that fucking happen. I'm not letting Aaron just run away from his idiot insecurities and start over without thinking about the woman who dedicated her life to his happiness – if not our whole family, he should at least think of her."

My heart ached just from looking at the fury and torment twisting Mason's face. Leaning against him, my legs still in his lap, I dared to put a hand on his chest, stroking gently when I felt just how rapidly his heart was beating. "That's perfectly fair. If I had someone like Clara growing up, I'd spend my life making sure I gave back till she had all the happiness she deserved," I said, hating Aaron in that moment for being so thankless. Not only did he have a mother his whole life, he had one who loved him like she was all that existed in her world. If I'd had that, I couldn't imagine taking it for granted let alone abandoning it the way he was doing now.

“I know you would.” I felt the rumble under Mason’s hard chest as he drew in a deep breath and let it slowly out. Relaxing a bit, he gazed down at my hand on him. I watched in awe as he wrapped his hand around my wrist, bringing my fingertips up to his mouth and brushing a kiss so faint against them that I wondered if I could even call it that. But whatever the gesture was, it had me spellbound. “You’re a better person than he is. You always deserved better than him,” Mason murmured, managing to crack an almost laugh. “My mom said herself that she was thankful he found you. That if he wouldn’t let her into his life anymore, at least she knew there was a good woman taking care of him.”

My chest twisted with another painful ache. “God, this makes me want to slap Aaron for being so cold to her. Why did she even favor him so much if he was such an ungrateful bastard?”

Mason shrugged. “He was her miracle baby.”

“What do you mean?”

Mason let out a breath, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat before he gave his anwer. “She wanted to give me a younger brother to grow up with,” he murmured. “But she lost all three pregnancies before Aaron.”

My stomach lurched so hard I clutched it. “She did?”

“Yes.” Mason frowned at me. I knew the blood had drained from my face because suddenly, he was cupping it in his hands and gazing into my eyes. “Taylor, are you okay?”

I breathed a moment, leaning into his palm. “Yes.” I gathered myself as best as I could. “I just can’t believe Aaron never told me that.”

“Well. He enjoyed the perks that came with being the miracle baby until all that loving attention became ‘pressure’ to him. Feeling like something huge was expected out of him – something he couldn’t give because he couldn’t match what I’d done in my career. But it was all self-inflicted. My mom would be proud of anything he decided to do. All she’s ever actually wanted from him is his love. Feeling like she has a family.”

“I can understand that,” I mumbled, realizing that was exactly what I’d wanted from Aaron myself. Jesus. I really should’ve hung out with his mother more often. “What about your dad?” I dared to ask curiously.

“He’s my dad,” Mason said bluntly. Then recognizing his tone, he cleared his throat. “I mean he provided for us. Made sure we never wanted for a thing. But he cheated openly on my mom and he wouldn’t stop no matter how often she or I begged him. Makes me fucking pray that she

didn’t stay with him all these years just because Aaron and I begged her not to get a divorce. We were in middle school, but she promised she wouldn’t. She still hasn’t,” Mason said, chewing his bottom lip. “And I know she’ll want even more to hang onto the family she’s got if she really loses Aaron. But if that fucking happens, I’ll still be the real family left for her and someday, I’ll give her everything she wants – the grandchildren, the big Christmases. All of that. I’ll do it.”

I could practically see the pictures in Mason’s head flickering behind his blue eyes. While a part of me ached for him and Clara, the other part was in awe of the fact that he’d just bared himself so honestly to me. Never in my life would I have imagined having a heart-to-heart with Mason Leo, let alone this kind of soul-baring conversation that served as basically an open door into his past – his whole being. My pulse picked up as I studied him, contemplating my own confession. I tried to tell myself it would be selfish to bring up now, so I pressed my lips together and tried to hold it in. But then without warning, it blurted out without my permission.

“I lost Aaron’s baby two years ago.”

I wasn’t sure if it was the sentence spoken aloud or the sheer hurt on Mason’s face that made my heart stop. His lips parted, opening and closing but saying nothing as he took in my words.

“It was three months after the break,” I went on quietly. “The one I told you about. I cried my eyes out when he asked for it because we’d just moved in together and I was so scared he was going to leave me. And then one night, he texted me and he said, ‘I’m sorry I’m weak.’ And considering how much Whitney was texting and calling him before our break, I knew he was about to go cheat on me with her. So I looked for him everywhere – I burned through four cabs and three trains in two hours just scouring the entire city for Aaron until I realized I wasn’t going to find him, and my relationship was over. So I called Sofia and we drank like crazy. But I lost control and I had too much. I wound up passing out on the floor of a public bathroom. I’d wake up only to vomit every once in awhile,” I confessed with a pause, disgusted as I remembered the smell of that night. “Fuck, I wish I didn’t just tell you that,” I whispered, my face hot with shame.

“Hey. Don’t,” Mason murmured, pulling me right onto his lap. Straddling him now, I found my face so close to his that I couldn’t help but believe him when he said, “I want to hear. I want to know the things that

have happened to you, Taylor, so tell me and don't for a second be ashamed."

I swallowed the ball of emotion in my throat. "Okay," I breathed, taking a moment to figure out how to go on. His hands rubbed my back gently. I closed my eyes for a moment to soak in his comfort but then swallowing again, I went on. "Basically Sofia couldn't get me up on her own and the people at the bar were closing up and yelling for her to get me the hell out. And I was half dead from drinking so much, but I remember panicking for her and thinking that if Aaron came to get me, and if he somehow didn't cheat, I'd take him back and we'd start over. Long story short, he came. I heard his voice comforting me when he picked me up off the floor and I could hardly open my eyes but I could feel he was sorry. In the cab, I asked if he still loved me and he said yes. And in the morning, he was sitting at my bedside taking care of me." I closed my eyes for a moment, breathing steady so I could muster up the courage for what I was about to say next. "But within a week, I knew it was a mistake."

"What was?" Mason asked softly.

"Taking him back. He came to get me, he didn't cheat, and he was so good to me. He did everything he could to make it up to me and we were communicating better than ever. But I still felt this weird disconnect. Everyone thought we were the perfect couple – that he was the sweetest boyfriend. And aside from that night, or maybe because of that night, he *was*. He was the best boyfriend to me but I didn't want him anymore, and I didn't know how to reconcile those feelings because he was being more honest than ever, spending every minute away from work with me and taking me on all my dream trips. But for some reason, I didn't feel like I loved him anymore, and it took so much courage, but I finally decided I needed to leave. But then – " Out of nowhere, tears choked my throat. Struggling to finish, Mason did for me.

"You got pregnant," he murmured, his hands brushing the hair out of my face, his eyes on me even though I couldn't look at him. "You took it as a sign that you should be with him."

"If anything, I thought it would fix us. I thought it would make me feel that love I felt for him before the break," I whispered, tears rolling down my cheeks. "And it worked. At least I thought it did but I realize now it was just the joy being pregnant. Of carrying another life in my stomach and thinking about what I'd name my baby, how I'd dress him if he was a boy

or if she was a girl. I fantasized so much about being the mother I never had and it made me feel so good. I felt all the life and joy and energy I couldn't find in my relationship with Aaron before we got pregnant."

But then I lost it.

Him.

It was only after the miscarriage that Aaron and I found out the sex of the baby. He cried harder when he realized it was a boy. We both cried, really, for what felt like weeks on end. He was in pain himself, but he was my rock at that time. I had no one else to talk to – Lori was pregnant herself and I knew it had to be in poor taste to cry to her about it. So I didn't. Sofia was understanding, but I knew it tortured her that she didn't know what to say or how to make me stop crying. I knew also that it was hard for her to listen to the details because while she knew what miscarriage was, she didn't know exactly how it happened.

Neither had I before it did. No one had ever told me that I could lose my baby, know he was gone and still have to wait to pass him through my body. No one told me what it felt like to carry something lifeless inside you, nor did they talk about the bleeding – just how much there was during and even after the fact. But worst of all, no one warned me about how hard I would hang onto the memory of that last good ultrasound. I could still hear it if I wanted to. At ten weeks, my baby was still bobbing happily inside my belly. His heart was still beating and the whole world was still ahead of him.

But then just a couple days later, he was gone. And I was inconsolable.

Aaron did his best though. In fact, he did an incredible job. He got permission to leave the office an hour early every day so he could spend as much time with me as possible. We named our son, bought him a blanket and said our goodbyes to get closure. And from that point forward, I felt like Aaron and I were a team. Together, we'd gotten through the lowest point of our lives and grown a million times stronger as not just individuals, but as a couple. Those who did know about my miscarriage told me I was lucky to have the support I had from Aaron. Losing the life inside you was hard enough on its own. It would be harder without having someone so reliably there for you.

And I knew that was true.

"But I still felt completely out of love with him," I cried softly, confessing the words to Mason that I was so ashamed of. "After all we went

through and all he did for me, I still didn't feel right with him. I should have been appreciating him and thanking God for him, but all I could do was hate the fact that I didn't leave him when I had the chance because then I could have avoided all the pain. I wouldn't have to know what all of it felt like," I sobbed, loathing myself. My baby had already lost his chance at the world – he didn't need to know that his mother wished he'd never happened at all. It was selfish and pointless and painful, and I did my best to repent for those thoughts by being good to Aaron. By staying with him, reminding myself of how good he was and suffocating all thoughts of regret. I did it so well for awhile. I convinced myself we were perfect.

But then I woke up one morning and he was gone.

"Hey." Mason's whisper was intense, pleading as he cupped my face in his hands. "Don't blame yourself for this, Taylor. You can't," he urged me, thumbing the tears that streamed incessantly down my cheeks. "I'm sorry." His voice was filled with emotion I didn't know existed anywhere in that rock solid body. "I'm so fucking sorry this happened to you. I don't know the pain. I never will but I remember the nights my mother cried. I'll never forget how hard it was and I'd give anything to take those memories away from her. From you. But we can't rewind on the past and trust me, I fucking hate it, too," he murmured, his voice hoarse. My eyes were shut but his lips were close. I could feel them – almost taste them and it soothed me. Not completely, but enough for the tears to slow down. They finally stopped, but Mason kept my cheek in his hands and his fingers brushed through my hair. "We face probably a hundred forks in the road over the course of our lives and I guarantee you no one has ever lived to make the right decision every time. But you can't get the past back and you can't spend your life wishing you could. You just have to trust that if you're not in the right place right now, the steps you take from this point forward will get you there." He wet his lips when I finally met his gaze again. "Eventually, at least. Right?"

Staring at my hands on his chest, I nodded, surprised to find his simple words lifting the weight in my chest. "I think so."

He nodded, quiet for a moment, studying me as I let the hiccups pass and breathe deep again. When the calm returned, I looked up at Mason, remembering the last time I had cried in front of him. It was in my apartment, after processing the news of Aaron's wedding. Mason had barely looked at me as the tears rolled down my cheeks, only concerned with getting his chance to speak once I was done being needy and emotional.

God, it really wasn't that long ago, but it felt like the Mason then was the stranger to me – not the Mason sitting before me now, stroking my cheek and brushing any strands of hair from my face that had matted to my skin from the tears.

"Thank you," I whispered, realizing as the words came out that it was my first time saying them to Mason in person, and meaning it with every ounce of me, from the bottom of my heart. It felt like a little turning point for us, and maybe he realized it too because he looked at me in a way I'd never seen before. It couldn't pin what the expression was, but it made me feel damned good. Warm and safe. Almost loved. Sliding my hands up on his body, I hung them on his strong shoulders. "I didn't think I'd ever say any of that out loud to someone. And I don't know why but I'm actually…" I trailed off, hoping I hadn't set my sentence up to sound like an insult. "I'm actually glad it was you," I finally murmured. But then I winced. *That sounded wrong*. I kept my eyes down for a moment, bracing for Mason's smart reply.

But when I looked up again, he kissed me. His lips were so hot against mine I promptly lost every other thought I had a moment ago. I was more than fine with that. My arms around his neck, I kissed Mason back, moaning softly against his lips, luxuriating in the strength of both his arms wrapped so tight around my waist it felt like I was somewhere else – on our own island, the only ones who were breathing this air, the only one ones who could come close to understanding the gratification of the moment. He'd kissed me the other night at Noah's but this felt different – just as urgent but somehow softer. Easier. My body melted into his and I felt an odd sense of being okay, of belonging – as if I, for the first time in a long time, were finally and actually in the right place.

Chapter Thirteen

I felt oddly superstitious about it, but the next morning, I told Sofia the truth about everything. I had the green light from Mason and even if I didn't, I couldn't bear to keep her in the dark anymore. After all the demons that came out last night at the Victorian Hotel, it felt like I'd reached a breaking point and I couldn't stand for anything but honesty anymore. At least with the ones I loved.

And to my absolute relief, Sofia wasn't angry.

Curled up with two mugs of coffee at the café under her East Village apartment, we touched on every point of my arrangement with Mason with very little fanfare, which was surprising considering Sofia liked to gasp, squeal and flail around about everything. But there was none of that today. After taking a quiet moment to finally let it all sink in, she only said, "This explains a lot of Noah's comments."

I had to laugh. "What has he said?"

Sofia squinted as she sipped her spiced latte. "God, I can't even remember now. So many things here and there – like how Mason 'screwed himself' or how he's 'actually whipped now. I don't know. Basically a lot of surprise over Mason's behavior, which is clearly a good thing for you," Sofia snorted. "Considering Mase's history with women and the fact that his best friend of ten years doesn't recognize the way he's acting with you right now, I'd say you guys are a little realer than you think," she said, grinning and pointing at the look on my face. "And you're clearly happy about that because like I said even *before* I knew the truth, you really like that motherfucker. Like, beyond the physical. You *like* him, like him."

I couldn't even make fun of Sofia's elementary school terms for my feelings because it was fucking true. *Geez. When and how did this happen?* If I could transport myself back in the past and tell myself that one day, I'd be thinking all day about Mason Leo, missing him and aching for the comfort it felt like only he could provide, I'd tape my own mouth shut and call myself a filthy liar. Then again, if I could transport myself into the past, I'd probably have bigger priorities, like saying "no" to a break from Aaron and suggesting a full on breakup.

But as we touched on that subject, Sofia corrected me. "If you'd broken up with Aaron then, you would've never had the chance to discover that

Mason was the good brother. The one you were supposed to be with."

I chewed on the corner of my nail. "Let's… not talk too far into the future. I'm definitely enjoying myself with Mason right now but you can't let me get swept up off my feet and think about a serious or long-term relationship with him. My stomach gets all weird and twisty when I even start to fantasize about that."

"But we already established that he's never acted this way with any woman before. He was with Eva Tully for six months and she said the longest conversation about his life that she ever squeezed out of him lasted like three minutes. And he was just talking about the first Yankees game he went to as a kid, because they were at a Yankees game," Sofia revealed. "Trust me, that woman complained extensively to me about him before she got dumped and decided to trash his office and draw giant dicks on his door."

I laughed at the imagery in my head but I couldn't help but feel bad for Eva. "Six months dating someone and not being let in. That's tough."

"Yeah, well she stuck it out because she liked the idea of becoming Mrs. Mason Leo. And I get it – who wouldn't? He's got money and he's handsome."

"That's… wow. A severe understatement."

Sofia smirked. "I'm sure that's true and I realize you're all defensive of your boyfriend now," she teased, "but cut me some slack, he's my cousin and I don't see him the way you thirst hos do. Besides, you're detracting from my point, which is that he's gone many years knowing exactly what works for him in terms of dating. I know it seems like he goes through women like they're snotty tissues or something, but it's just because he refuses to lead anyone on or get in a relationship, lose interest and wind up cheating. Not after what he saw his mom through growing up."

"So what are you telling me here? That I have permission to ask him if he wants to date me for real? If we're still going to see each other after the wedding?"

I had hoped that Sofia would give me a resounding "yes" and demand what I was waiting for, but instead she crinkled her nose and tilted her head from side to side as she thought about it. "No, don't do that yet," she finally concluded. "Sit-down talks freak men out no matter what they're thinking or how they're feeling, so I'd avoid one of those till you've gone through a

little more. At least get past the St. Lucia trip before you have that conversation."

I heaved a sigh. "Fair enough."

"In the meantime though, you have my permission to have sex with the man."

"Oh, I was waiting for your permission?" I teased. She turned her nose up and feigned sass.

"No, but you could certainly use my very valid opinion, which is that he's more than proved he cares about you and isn't trying to buy sex from you. Whatever's going on between you guys definitely equals at *least* three dates in real life now, and as you know, that is the magic number you wait till you have sex with someone, so… have sex with him. You know you want to."

I pressed my palms hard against the heat of my mug. "I do," I groaned, flashing back to that morning I woke up in Mason's bed and got to watch him walk around in just a towel. God, those fucking abs. Those *hipbones*. They were cut so deep, a perfect V that teased me like two arrows pointing furiously at the main attraction. God, I wanted so badly to finally just *touch* that main attraction.

"Taylor. For the tenth time – inappropriate for you to make these sex faces in front of me."

I caught myself quickly. "I was definitely doing it that time," I admitted sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just give yourself the relief of having actual sex with him so I don't have to see you look at squirmy and tortured."

"Noted," I said, my cheeks burning at the mere thought of allowing myself to sleep with Mason. Heat flashed all throughout me as I imagined how it'd feel to have the weight of his body on mine, both of us undressed, skin touching skin.

The image refused to leave my head that night when Mason came to my apartment. It was late, nearly midnight and we'd both had long days, so we sat together on my couch with a bottle of wine, the dinner he brought and a movie we weren't quite watching on TV. Our energy was low but the air between us was still thick, still buzzing with the tension of sex, desire and the words we were either too tired or wary to say. I was amazed by how hot it felt despite the languid quiet – how the sleepiness in the room

managed to put more heat in every word he spoke, every look we exchanged.

I wasn't sure when or how it started – it probably had to do with him being so visibly tired from work – but I gave him a massage. I'd always given them to Aaron but they always felt somewhat like chores. I could never strike the balance of "not too hard" or "not too soft" with him and there were always too many sudden yelps of, "*Ouch!*" for it to ever feel erotic.

But Mason was a completely different story. Obviously. He gladly absorbed every ounce of strength from my hands and long fingers as I sat behind him, my legs wrapped around his waist and the heels of my palms sliding up his back. I was sure I was enjoying myself as much as he was, memorizing his every rock-hard ridge and muscle with a hot arousal that mounted by the second. He knew it too, because with every grunt that escaped his throat, my thighs pumped around him. I couldn't help it. There was just something so primal, so masculine and sexy about the sound – I'd never heard it before and the fact that I brought it out of him had my panties saturating quickly, my body writhing and twisting between his back and the couch.

His shirt eventually came off. Eventually, we moved from the couch to the bed I hadn't touched in months – the one I had shared for years with his brother. I had Mason lay in it now as I straddled the small of his back, rubbing his shoulders, in awe of the fact that he had his head resting on my pillow – that my hands were tracing the lines of his body and giving him so much pleasure that he was groaning deep, the sounds awakening every unfulfilled need in my body.

"Turn over," I whispered to him. When he did, I breathed out a moan, his erection hot and hard under my pussy, swelling and straining against his pants as I continued to straddle and massage him. I rested my hands just below his collarbones and worked my fingers over the tension, wishing I could consume the delicious groan that thundered from the depths of his chest.

"Christ, that feels incredible," he murmured as I worked my way to his shoulders. As I massaged them, I rocked my hips gently, slow and first then gradually faster till I knew I had his cock as hard as it could possibly get. His eyes wanted to be closed, I could see that, but Mason opened them, lifting his head just enough to watch me riding him. "Fuck," he whispered,

his gaze trained on me, lifting slowly from the swivel of my hips to the light bouncing of my breasts as I moved on him. “I could fucking watch this all night,” he murmured, eyes heavy but unblinking.

He eventually found his way on top of me. My legs wrapped around his waist again, he pressed his throbbing arousal against me, thrusting the way his tongue did the same in my mouth. As he explored me in a way he never had before, I felt lost in Mason – like I’d surrendered every part of my body to him. He captured my mouth, filled his hands with my breasts, pinned me to the bed with every push of his hard cock against my pussy. The sounds of our breaths and moans and bodies jostling on the sheets were loud enough for awhile to drown out his phone. He ignored three calls in a row before relenting with an angry “*fuck*,” climbing off of me and hastily grabbing the phone.

“Ed, talk to me,” he muttered the minute he answered. His eyes remained pinned on me as Ed spoke, and they sparked with a fire as I reached under my leggings and panties to touch myself. Despite the business call, Mason watched me, nodding and encouraging me with a look of lust that thickened as I slowly picked up the speed of my stroke.

“They broke the terms of their contract so we’re by no means obligated to do that. That’s all you need to tell them,” he said, refusing to break his stare from me as I arched my back and let out a moan. “Christ,” Mason cursed in a way that I knew had nothing to do with his call and everything to do with me as I shed my leggings, leaving myself in just my cream lace panties and loose raglan. He couldn’t help but come closer now. His jaw was tight as I stroked faster between my legs now, watching the way his six-pack clenched with every jagged breath, reveling in how incredibly blue his eyes looked as they anticipated me coming

“Yeah. That’s fine. Ed, let me talk to you about this tomorrow.”

The last sentence of conversation Ed subjected Mason to had him clenching his teeth, his stare so heavy between my thighs now that I could practically feel their heat bringing me closer to orgasm. The second Mason hung up he pounced on me, making me shriek in shock and delight as he buried his face in my neck and thrust a hand between my legs.

“Let me hear you come right now,” he growled, cupping my pussy over my panties, fingering between my folds then rubbing my clit so furiously I came within seconds, gasping for breath against his lips as he kissed me with unbridled passion, his fingers tangled in my hair and making a fist that

only relaxed once he'd stroked every last aftershock out of my body. Once I was finished, I closed my eyes, raking my fingers through his thick hair as he kissed my breasts over my shirt, brushing his lips along their heavy curves and up my neck till his mouth was back on mine. But he gave me barely two seconds of his gentle kiss before pulling away.

"I should go," he said.

Despite the bliss of a few seconds ago, my heart dropped. But as I sat up in bed, I didn't argue, still feeling torturously like it wasn't my place to. So instead, I sat there, eyes wide and hair rumpled as I watched Mason get dressed and gather his things without looking much my way. Or maybe he did and I just refused to count it because what I wanted was his attention back to being rapt on me, undivided and unblinking. I had been spoiled and now there was no going back – I wanted Mason Leo so fucking badly. I wanted every part of him, and I wanted him to want me.

But as intimate as we'd just been, we were still in some kind of limbo – some agonizing place where I still wouldn't let myself ask him if anything had changed in our contract. My pride was killing me, and I was letting it.

You don't have the right to be upset, I reminded myself as I said goodbye to him at the door. *He's not technically yours.* But that didn't stop me from peeking my head out the door to watch him get to the elevators. And it didn't stop me from smiling when he looked back and with his hands slid in his pockets, tilted his head, returning my gaze for a second before stepping into the elevator and out of sight.

Chapter Fourteen

With two days left before we departed for St. Lucia, Mason's work schedule grew hectic. I understood fully that running a company of a hundred employees was a real responsibility, so I braced myself to be ignored and tried to take comfort in the fact that the last night we had together still had him sending flirty to filthy texts that made me bite my lip on the couch and look up to realize I had no idea what was happening on TV anymore, because I'd spent so much time smiling like an idiot at my phone.

But my high dampened slightly on Saturday, when Mason texted at night saying he'd yet to leave the office. He still had far too much to get done before the wedding and would have to cancel dinner, marking about sixty hours gone by since he had watched me come on my bed.

Not that I was counting.

But around nine that night, I got another message from him.

MASON: What are you doing?
ME: Watching bad TV
ME: Why what's up?
MASON: Not much. Just wanting to go home
ME: You're the boss so do it?
MASON: Unfortunately not an option
MASON: Will you be sleeping soon?
ME: Probably not. Why?
MASON: I need to see you

I raked my bottom lip between my teeth. God, those five words were so simple but good enough to send a surge of heat throughout my entire body.

ME: But you're still at the office right?
MASON: Yes. Just me and a handful of others at this point. I'll send a car to bring you here if you're willing to come.

My heart actually fluttered. I was already up as I typed my response, shedding my T-shirt and sweatpants on the way to my closet.

ME: I can be ready in 20 minutes.
MASON: Thank God

I chewed back a ridiculous grin at the last two-word message. With my phone resting on my nightstand, I typed with one hand while getting dressed with the other.

ME: Anything I can bring you?
MASON: No I have everything I need
MASON: Except one thing obviously. Car is on its way

* * *

It was strange to see The Leo Group office at night. While all the lights remained on, most every desk and room was empty. The city lights outside glittered at me as I walked down the quiet hall, detecting the sound of Mason's low voice as I made my way closer to his office.

I leaned in the doorframe when I got there, letting Mason continue going over something with a few colleagues. They all looked fairly exhausted, but the other two men didn't make exhausted look quite as ridiculously sexy as Mason did. His tie was loosened, his sleeves rolled up and his forearms looking delicious as he rubbed the back of his neck. *Lord.* He looked so damned good I almost didn't want him to look up. I rarely had time to observe him without his knowledge and there was just something so painfully attractive about Mason in business mode. Of course when he finally did look up and notice me, my little smile burst wider.

"Hi," he exhaled so eagerly the other two turned around right away. I smiled at them, giving a polite wave as Mason made his way to me. He breathed out again when his hands made contact with my waist. "Thank you for coming. I was about to fall asleep."

"I'll make sure you don't. But do you want me to wait in another room till you're done here?"

"No, we're just finishing up."

"He's lying," said the blonde-haired one. "He's just non-functioning now that you're here. He's been waiting."

"Oh," I laughed, lifting my eyebrows. "I apologize then."

“Don’t. He wouldn’t let us go home so we’ve just been desperately waiting for him to tire out. You just saved our nights.”

I laughed and stood back as the two men packed up to go, recapping a few notes with Mason before giving a salute and walking out the door. Shutting it fully, I turned to see Mason whipping off his tie as he sat in his chair. As I made my way to him, he fixed his eyes on me, watching me as I perched myself at the edge of his desk.

“Long day?” I asked as his eyes traveled unapologetically up my crossed legs. They were wrapped in black tights paired with an off-the-shoulder sweater dress that Sofia classified as “not-even-trying-to-be” sexy. “At least now you’ll actually be looking forward to St. Lucia.”

Mason gave a tired laugh. But he didn’t respond – at least not in words. Leaning back, he held out his hand and when I took it, he brought me close enough to cup the backs of my thighs and pull me onto his lap. I masked my excitement well as I obliged and straddled him, letting him snake my arms around his neck till I was settled comfortably in his arms. I wet my lips. We’d sat this closely that night at the Victorian Hotel, but this time felt completely different. For starters, I wasn’t crying. I was inches from Mason’s faint, sexy grin, our noses almost touching and our relaxed breaths mingling. It was easily the closest we’d ever been to each other and the realization alone made me squirm. But being that I was in Mason’s lap, my squirming had him quickly groaning and holding me still with two handfuls of my ass. My mouth parted at his firm grip, and I let out a breath that made him murmur, “Don’t do this to me.”

I countered. “What if I want to?”

Mason cocked an eyebrow. “Want to what?” When I bit my lips, he grinned wickedly. “Don’t get shy now. Tell me what you want to do.”

I stared back at the mischief in his eye. “I want to do what you keep refusing to let me because you think it’ll make me feel used.”

“And what’s that?”

My smile was a bit shy as I rubbed his chest. “Return the favor.”

I could feel him getting turned on. “Return the favor. I don’t know what that means,” Mason challenged with a smirk. “Tell me explicitly. In words.”

“I want to make your cock hard and put it in my mouth,” I returned so quickly he sat stunned for a moment. But while he was still for a moment, I felt his erection twitch under me. I watched lust cloud over his face as he

twisted handfuls of my sweater. “I want to make you come as hard as you’ve made me come.”

“Is that right.” His breaths grew heavier as he stretched my top. My arousal built up as I watched the cotton inch down my body – my shoulders first, then the tops of my breasts, hooking on my hard nipple till Mason was a short yank away from exposing me fully. His eyelids were heavy as he teased himself. He wetted his sculpted lips as he stared ahead at my breasts, his cock swelling furiously underneath me. “You don’t know how hard it was for me to get anything done this weekend,” his mouth moved closer to my tight peaks, “when all I could think about were these perfect fucking tits of yours.”

Feeling wicked, I gazed down at his handfuls of my dress. Just as he yanked it all the way down, I clasped my hands over my breasts, drawing a vicious groan from his lips as I covered what he was so aching to see.

“Come on,” he breathed, tortured. “Show me.”

“No.”

“You don’t want to do this to me.”

“Why not?” I cocked my head mischievously. But instead of answering, Mason gripped the edge of his desk, pulled us over till I was sandwiched between his broad chest and its glass surface. Wrapping his hands around my wrists, he tightened just enough to remind me of his strength. Then with a grunt and a pull he exposed my breasts for his mouth, growling as he caught and sucked my nipple between his hot lips. I gasped as he leaned forward and pushed me back on the desk, soaking my panties as he sucked on me hungrily, greedily. I let out a moaning breath, dizzy as blood rushed from my brain to the throbbing pulse between my legs.

“Touch yourself for me.”

His demand came with the sound of him undoing his belt. *Yes.* Back arched, I closed my eyes and obliged, feeling the arousal that soaked through both my panties and tights. *Holy shit.* I could hardly keep track of the different pleasures humming through me as Mason drew his tongue over my breast, furiously stroking his dick as I rubbed circles over my clit. Sensation burst in hot explosions throughout my whole body and only made me ache for more. But while I pleaded breathily for a condom, there was none in his office or my purse, so I was left to moan desperately as Mason gripped the root of his cock and teased me over my tights, tracing the length of my wetness with his thick, pulsing tip.

“Mason, please, I can’t...”

It was torment so ferociously wet and hot I was ready to say *fuck it*. I was so ready to give in but then he lifted me onto his desk, laying me flat on my back as he gripped my tights at the thighs and tore apart. I barely processed the sound of them ripping wide open before Mason slid two fingers inside and sucked on my clit. My jaw dropped as he worked his mouth over my swollen pearl, his tongue darting back and forth over it then swirling around as he pumped his fingers ruthlessly inside me. The incessant clinking of his belt only turned me on further because I knew what rapid motions were prompting that noise. He was jerking himself off. Furiously. *God*, *this is too good*. I felt woozy, out of my mind with satisfaction, but I lifted my head, bringing my knee close to my lips as I watched the muscle on Mason’s forearm twitch, using his firm grip to pleasure himself as his mouth pleasured me. I begged him not to stop as he lashed at me while bringing himself closer, his sculpted features twisting with the need to come.

But he got me there first, grasping my thighs as he groaned against my pussy, launching me like a rocket over the edge. Bucking against his desk, I practically screamed for the ecstasy surging through me. It was practically blinding, an orgasm more powerful than the last but while I wanted to soak in it, I wanted more to bring Mason to the heights he brought me. So straddling him again, I let him pull off my dress. He grunted as I wrapped both hands around the length of his cock. His lips were parted, his eyes filled with sleepy awe as he watched my breasts bounce between my arms while stroking him, picking up my pace till he was gritting his teeth and on the verge of coming.

When I felt him hardening in my grip, I let go and lowered myself to the ground, reveling in the shocked, “*Fuck*,” he breathed out as I wrapped my lips around the head of his cock. He growled with even thicker, raspier pleasure as I dropped my mouth down on his shaft and dragged my tight, wet pull back to his tip. My hands trailed along his calves as I bobbed up and down on his lap, my clit throbbing again when I felt his hand grab a firm fistful of my hair. Gentle but firm, he guided me, murmuring sexy, gravelly filth at me as he watched me suck him off.

But I took control of the pace again when I felt him close, harder in my mouth than I knew possible. My hands were slippery as I stroked and sucked, my lips hot and swollen as they brought him to a sudden and

shuddering orgasm. I gasped, eyes wide and back arched as Mason pumped stream after stream of thick cum onto my breasts, the perfect features on his face twisted in the hot, tortured, incredible pleasure. The fact that I was the one who brought him to those heights filled me with a dirty little sense of pride, especially as I knelt there wearing every drop of his satisfaction. I was so in awe I stayed there simply staring down at myself for a moment, feeling sexier than I'd ever felt in my life, especially as Mason gazed down at me, breathing hard and physically unable to pull his eyes away.

God, it felt good to be looked at that way.

It felt even better when the person looking was Mason Leo.

Though he tried to get back to work, Mason called it a night within twenty minutes and had his car take us to dinner. My tights thoroughly ruined, I wriggled into a new pair we bought at a twenty-four hour Duane Reade, laughing the whole time as Mason held his coat above me like a curtain.

After dinner that night, he took me home again. And though once again, we didn't have sex, we got into bed together this time. And while I passed out before him, I woke in the night to feel my back against the hard warmth of his chest, and my resting pulse spiked just a bit when I processed his breath on my neck and his arm draped heavily around me.

Chapter Fifteen

It was my last day before leaving for St. Lucia, so I was happy to brave the freezing temperatures to stroll the holiday market at Columbus Circle. I'd be in eighty-degree sunshine tomorrow, so a bit of a chill didn't bother me.

Wandering around the holiday markets, I entertained the thought of buying gifts despite the fact that I told Sofia I'd be swearing off Christmas, my birthday and New Years this season. After the breakup, I wanted no reminder that the days existed since I'd be spending them alone. So I warned Sofia not to buy me anything, as I wouldn't be shopping for anyone myself. But tonight, I was more than happy to stroll the tents. I wore a placid smile as I wandered around alone, sampling apple cider and cooing over whittled tree ornaments, homemade peppermint bark and a million things I wouldn't have cared about were it not for my mood. It continued on a high as I ditched the freezing outdoors for the heated luxury of the Shops at Columbus Circle.

But just as I pushed through the glass doors into the magnificent lobby, a call rang on my phone and I stopped in my tracks. Within the first few notes of the song, my heart was racing and I cursed the fact that I couldn't even tell myself it might be Mason or Sofia.

Because I still had a special ring tone assigned to Aaron.

I hadn't thought to change it since he never contacted me after leaving. But now as I stood in the middle of a holiday rush with hordes of locals and tourists streaming past me in both directions, my ex-fiancé was finally calling. And after the drama witnessed by dozens of his friends this past week at Noah's apartment, I had a feeling I knew what might've prompted his first urge to call me since leaving. My hand shaking, I dragged my thumb across the screen, pressing the phone to my ear but saying nothing. I detected Aaron's breathing on the other end before he even spoke a word.

"Taylor?"

I closed my eyes at the sound of his voice. My heart immediately raced and I gave no reaction to the person who bumped into me and shot a dirty look over his shoulder. On cloud nine before, I was on my own island of panic now as I mustered up the strength to speak.

"Aaron."

But no sooner had I said his name did he hiss, “This better be a *fucking joke*, Taylor.” His fury woke me right up and suddenly, I was breathing hard through my nose, trying to narrow down the millions of questions and retorts I had for him as he railed against me on the other end of the line. “For Christ’s sake, please tell me you have an explanation for me!”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“I’m talking about how many fucking people have been calling me telling me they’ve been seeing you with *Mason*. I didn’t even listen to them at first because I swore you had to be smarter than that. I swore there was no way you could be that stupid, but now it’s getting to the point where I can’t keep telling myself they’re lying, so please – for Christ’s sake, please tell me this isn’t real. Please tell me you are fucking *kidding* me, Taylor.”

“You’re the one who’s gotta be kidding me, Aaron,” I seethed in sheer awe of his nerve. “Do you have memory loss or are we not going to acknowledge the fact that this is the *first fucking time* you’ve called me since you *left* me without warning – and in case you forget, you skipped out on not just our wedding but our bills that I had to pick up a second full-time job to cover. Considering the fact that your shotgun engagement to Eva Tully is the least of the problems you left me with, I’d say you’re the one who should be fucking explaining yourself.”

Frozen in the middle of the teeming lobby, my heart pounded out of my chest, my knuckles white as I gripped my phone tight in anticipation of Aaron’s reply.

“I was going to explain to you,” he finally muttered.

“Explain to me now.”

“I had a lot of pressure on me that you would never understand.”

“Well try your best to spell it out because I was with you for three years, Aaron so at the very least, I deserve even your most pathetic explanation as to why you packed your things and left me the way you – ”

“*Christ*, Taylor! I’m sorry! I couldn’t be who anyone wanted me to be, okay? I’m not Mason and for that, I’m sorry to my parents. I’m also not fucking husband material and for that, I’m sorry to you.”

“Oh, but you’re husband material when your bride is a swimsuit model with a billionaire father?”

“*Yes*,” Aaron growled, so unapologetic I nearly broke my phone. “I can start anew here. I have resources here that I don’t have at home.”

“You mean you have money and status that you don’t have to work for like your brother did,” I bit back, my eyes on fire and unblinking as I soaked in the silence of his shame. It was heavy and palpable and to my surprise, considering I once lived to ensure Aaron’s comfort, I enjoyed every twisted second of it.

“You’re with him for the money then,” he finally bit back.

“No but if I was, you’d be one to talk.”

“I don’t feel pressure with Eva the way I did with you.”

“That’s because you don’t fucking *know* her,” I hissed in disbelief. “You haven’t spent enough time with her to run into a single real challenge yet. You have no history with her and I hate to break it to you, but if you last even six months as a couple, Aaron, you’ll find one. There will be an obstacle, probably more than one and as her husband it will be your job to stay there even when it gets tough. You’ll have to be there for her and love her and support her like you didn’t with me.”

“How the fuck can you say that?” he returned instantly but in a soft voice. “How can you say I wasn’t there for you? You know I was. We couldn’t spend even a minute apart from each other after we lost the baby.” My throat closed. Without warning, I choked up, unable to say a word as Aaron went on in a small voice. “I know you remember. I took off from work to be with you. I had everyone telling me I better be taking good care of you, that I better give you your perfect fairytale ending after everything you went through, like I didn’t lose my baby too. Well I did, and I know that was the worst time of your life but you have to know it was mine too, and it was fucking hard for me too.”

I could feel my heart throwing itself against my ribs. My pulse chattered in my teeth as I stood there in the crowd, tears welling in my eyes as I stared out at nothing.

“I know it was. And you were there for me, Aaron,” I muttered. “But considering you proposed to me a year later, I expected you to be there forever instead of taking off one night without telling me.”

“I have my reasons, Taylor, but I’m *sorry*.”

“You’re not,” I murmured, calmly dabbing the corners of my eyes. “Or you’d tell me your reasons.”

“Why don’t you tell me yours first?” Aaron countered angrily. “What reason could you possibly have to get anywhere fucking *near* Mason?”

“He makes me happy,” I replied between my teeth.

“Bullshit. He makes you happy until he hurts you worse than you’ve ever hurt in your life.”

“Again, you’re one to talk.”

Aaron snarled in frustration. “I’m only warning you because I still love you, Taylor.” Off my bitter laugh, he insisted, “I *do*. It’s easy for a man to disappear overnight – it’s not as easy for three years of love to. You know that. So please listen to me when I say that you cannot trust Mason. He has lied to you already and he will continue to till the day he gets sick of you, which will happen the second you put out. Once he’s had his taste, he’ll be gone.”

“And what makes you think we haven’t already been intimate?”

Aaron laughed forcefully. “Because I *know* you, Taylor. I was with you for three years. I met you when you were twenty-two and had slept with only one other guy in your life. And considering you took more than a month to even sleep with me, I have a hard time believing you already spread your legs for the likes of my brother. You’re not brave enough and he’s got too many options. If you fucked already, he’d be bringing someone else to the wedding.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed.

“You’re upset because I’m right,” Aaron said harshly. “And because deep down, you know you’re making a mistake. Once upon a time, you hated Mason because he lied and womanized and treated women like toys – just like he’s doing to you right now. I swear he is, baby. Mark my words.”

My lip curled. “I’m not your baby.”

“True,” Aaron snorted. "You’re not anyone’s baby anymore.”

Livid, I hung right up. I would’ve thrown my phone against the wall if I knew Aaron could feel it. *Fucking hell.* Frozen in the midst of the teeming holiday crowd, I stood there, silently enraged. My hands shaking, I waited for the change of heart to set in – for me to decide that I couldn’t do this after all. I couldn’t go to Aaron’s wedding. I barely wanted my closure anymore because I honestly didn’t want to hear his pathetic, entitled reason for leaving me.

But to my surprise, I realized I still wanted to see him. Rather, I wanted him to see me with Mason. I couldn’t wait for him to. I couldn’t wait for him to see how I wanted to dress up for Mason, how I wanted to touch him in public – how I now had heat and the passion in my eyes that Aaron had never elicited from me before. I was dying to show him how different I was

now that I felt like I was enjoying my life instead of just trying to prove to myself that I was. As furious and emotional as I was, I was also charged and so damned ready for tomorrow I could feel the anticipation rattling my bones. I'd already prepared to enjoy St. Lucia with Mason.

But now I was ready to have fun with our act in a way I hadn't before.

Chapter Sixteen

God, I could get used to this. I let Mason pour me a second glass of Moët as I gazed out the window at the sheet of feathery clouds below us. The interior of the jet was sleeker than my own apartment with gleaming, wooden surfaces and champagne-colored everything.

"Are you guys already doing refills?" Sofia called from down the cabin, sitting next to Noah, her "plus one for shits and giggles." With a row of leather recliners between our couch and hers, I couldn't quite see them but I could definitely hear them.

"Yo, can we get some too?" Noah asked.

"You can if you get up and bring your butts over here," I called back.

I could hear their bags of chips rustling as they both thought about it. "No, it's too far," Noah finally decided. I snorted at their remarkable laziness, but I was happy to maintain my alone time with Mason. Wrapped in the same blanket, we were snuggled up together on the couch in a way that made me feel undeniably like a real couple. Of course, I still refused to let myself strike up that classic "what are we doing" conversation because I didn't want to ruin the moment. I'd never felt this good in my life and if the feeling was going to end right after we returned from St. Lucia, I didn't want to know, especially since we hadn't even gotten there yet.

"Birthday toast?" Mason suggested as we touched glasses.

I made a face of surprise. "Oh. Sure."

He laughed in a way that made his blue eyes crinkle. "How do you forget your own birthday?"

"Well, it's been a bit of a roller coaster lately," I excused myself, though I knew the real reason. My birthday was the twenty-eighth. That was well after the wedding and thanks to the uncertainty in my unique circumstances with Mason, I had no interest in thinking about what life would be like after the wedding. Once upon a time, I lived to think about the future but with him, I wanted nothing but to live in the now. I wasn't sure what that said about us as a couple or fake couple, but I didn't care to find out.

"Well." Reaching into his jacket, Mason pulled out a little box with a white bow on it. Nestled under his arm, I looked curiously up at him.

"What is that?"

“A birthday gift.”

“Why?”

“Because what kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t buy you a birthday gift?” Mason smirked, handing it to me. “But before you open it, I want to hear what you want for your birthday. Just to see if I came anywhere close with what I bought you.”

Running my finger over the satin ribbon, I smiled. “I’m positive you didn’t get me what I wanted.”

Mason laughed. “Little fucking harsh, but what makes you say that?”

“Because I didn’t want anything. I genuinely hadn’t thought about it. But if I did, I’d want something that wouldn’t fit in this box,” I said.

“What’s that?”

I relaxed onto his chest. Answering “you” would be painfully cheesy, so I went with the next true answer I could think of. “Honestly, I’m not used to things being as eventful as they have lately, so I just want a second to myself,” I laughed. “I know I’m not working right now but it’s still been a bit dramatic for me to feel like I’m on vacation. There’s been Whitney and Aaron’s dickhead friends and then Aaron himself yesterday, so… definitely a lot going on. Definitely haven’t recognized my own head lately, so peace and quiet would be easily the best birthday gift.”

Mason nodded. “I see. That has to be the most depressing birthday wish I’ve heard in my life, but to each their own.”

“Shut up.” I gave his chest a tiny smack. “I mean, if I could really have anything, it would be my own island where it was just me for a day – me, a comfy couch and a giant palm tree over it. And a shelf of all the books I’ve started but haven’t had the time to finish. And a bottle of wine. With a pretty glass because cheap wine glasses are just so depressing to drink out of.”

“Now we’re talking. Bit of weird fucking island, but we’re getting somewhere.”

“And hydrangeas. Those are like, all our clients’ favorite flowers to use for events at Vandermark, and you’d think I’d be totally sick of them by now but I love them. They’re my favorite. So those would be on my island, too.”

“I don’t think all these things exist together in nature.”

“Well palm trees don’t grow chocolate but on my island, they do and it’s my imagination so stop being a buzzkill.”

“Shit, if you’re the one telling me to stop being a buzzkill I really need to re-evaluate my life.”

I smacked him again. “Can I open my gift now?”

“Go for it.”

Sitting up, I pinched the end of the soft ribbon and pulled till I could lift off the top of the pretty, blue box. My wary smile spread into a giant grin as I let my eyes settle on the gift that lay inside. “Mason, you’re an asshole – you know that, right?”

“I do but I don’t mind when you tell me. I’m for some reason into it.”

“Yeah, we’ve already established the weird fact that angry women turn you on.”

“I think you know that you turn me on regardless of what you do,” Mason said, forcing me to bite back my smile. He studied me with a grin of his own for a bit but then nodded down at my gift. “Want to try it on for me?”

I lifted the black panties with the word “Wednesday” written on them in sparkling rhinestones. “You know, for some reason, I don’t really feel inclined to do that.”

“I just wanted to complete your collection. From what I recall, you were missing your Wednesday panties.”

“Or are you once again buying me gifts to bribe me into having sex with you?” I teased. “I mean diamond necklace, rhinestone-studded panties… seems like some pretty overtly sexual hints.”

Mason laughed as he removed his arm from around my shoulder. “Fuck these ‘buying sex’ jokes, Taylor. I won’t even touch you for the duration of this trip. How’s that work for you?”

“It doesn’t work for either of us because it goes against the plan.”

“Fine. I’ll put my hands all over you in front of everyone, but once we’re in the privacy of our hotel room, you don’t get any of this.” He was being jokingly crass but the way he grabbed his junk still turned me on. I eyed him, resting one leg back onto his lap and taking his hand.

“Fine. And you don’t get any of this either,” I teased, drawing his palm over my breasts and then running it between my legs for half a second before he growled something lusty and climbed on top of me, giving me the full weight of his body that I so desperately craved. But as soon as my leg wrapped around him and he thrust against me, Sofia yelled at us.

“Stop! We can hear you!”

“And we’re not drunk enough for this shit because you wouldn’t refill our drinks,” Noah added.

Laughing as Mason groaned, I pushed him off of me. “We’re just… hugging aggressively,” I called back, my breaths short and heavy as Mason buried his face in my neck, cupping my hand over his hot erection.

“We don’t believe you and we require either more Moët or for you guys to fucking knock it off!”

“Fine!”

I wound up fulfilling both my best friend’s requests, going over to refill her champagne as Mason stayed on our couch to cool down. With Noah passed out next to Sofia, she clucked and shook her head at me. “You’re killing the man,” she whispered. “Mase might be the first person on Earth to die of blue balls.”

“Might I remind you that I’d probably have sex with him on this plane if it weren’t for you and Noah being here.”

“Oh, sorry, let me just jump out the window so you can finally get laid despite the fact that I told you to get it over with ages ago.”

“Smart ass,” I giggled as we toasted our glasses. Sipping my drink, I gazed out at the glittering ocean below us, letting out a long breath of awe. “God.”

“We’re almost there.”

“I know. Which means it’s really happening. I was engaged to Aaron two months ago and now we’re two hours from the destination where he’s going to marry another woman. Sofia, we’re going to Aaron’s *wedding*,” I whispered, finally processing that the day we’d planned for had finally come. I chewed on my nails. “It’s just so fucking weird.”

“It really is.” Sofia stared blankly out the window. “But you know what the weirdest part is?” She brought her earnest gaze to mine.

“What?”

“That you’re not upset about it. Not even a little,” she murmured with a little grin. “In fact, you’re happier than you’ve ever been in your life because every day with Mason keeps making your smile brighter and brighter, and while I kind of hate him for getting you over Aaron like I couldn’t, I also fucking love him for doing whatever he did to heal you,” she said quietly, tangling her fingers in mine. “I couldn’t fix it when you lost the baby, and I couldn’t fix it when Aaron left you. And as your best

friend, it was the worst feeling in the world so thank God for Mason because now you're back. And I can see it – you're better than ever."

I smiled back at her.

I couldn't argue that at all.

Chapter Seventeen

“This place is beautiful, but we are fucking idiots,” Noah declared upon arrival. The Sundara Resort was a gleaming paradise set atop a lush, five hundred acre beach. It was evening but we could see the colorful fish flitting in the waters of the crystal clear cay, and we could make out the towering silhouette of the majestic mountains that encompassed the hotel.

But none of us could quite enjoy the scenery just yet because thanks to champagne-heavy plane ride, we’d forgotten to change out of our New York outfits before touching down in St. Lucia. Wrapped in winter sweaters, thermal leggings and thick jeans, we dragged our feet into the front desk of the hotel, laughing miserably at how breathtakingly stupid we were. Trailing behind Sofia and Noah, Mason and I snorted, watching them whine like children and strip off as much as was appropriate for being in public. Picking up the scarf she left strewn on the floor, I agreed with Sofia’s proposal that we check in then promptly jump in the pool.

Set with our key cards, the four of us split up to find our rooms and find each other again at the pool. As if I weren’t hot enough, I felt the heat of Mason’s stare on me as we rode up the elevator.

“God, I’m looking forward to seeing you in a bikini.”

“Mm. Too bad that’s all you’re going to be able to do.”

“Come again?”

I smiled mischievously. “You can look but you can’t touch.”

Mason gave that sexy laugh. “I didn’t realize we were still on that.”

“Oh, we are.” I pressed myself against the opposite side of the elevator. “I think it’d be fun to torture you a bit. If you think it’s funny to make fun of my lame birthday wish and then gift me a pair of Wednesday panties, then you deserve a little bit of punishment.”

“I know I shouldn’t be but I’m turned on. Any idea what kind of punishment?”

“Somewhat,” I replied.

We left it at that before finding our beautiful suite on a floor of only four others, the room tucked behind a brush of coconut palms. It was beautiful, with sunset-colored hardwood floors, bright accents splashed about and a plush, white hammock right by the balcony overlooking the water. I genuinely couldn’t wait to get into my swimsuit and dive in but

after searching fruitlessly through my luggage, I remembered that some of my new purchases were in Sofia's luggage, so Noah let me do a quick switch-a-roo, coming to my room to have a pre-dip drink with Mason while I went downstairs to get changed with Sofia. Since the entire resort was rented out solely for guests of the Leo-Tully wedding, she had apparently bumped quickly into familiar faces and learned exactly everyone was hanging out tonight.

"There's supposedly a spectacular infinity pool upstairs and even better, Aaron and Eva won't be there because they're having some boring-ass dinner with her parents," Sofia said, tying the neck of her teeny, tiny floral bikini. She grinned as she watched me pull on mine. "I see we're going for heavy torture tonight," she remarked, nodding with approval for my choice of swimsuit.

"Thought it'd be fun to rile him up as much as possible before giving him some much-deserved relief," I grinned, adjusting the cups of my white crochet bikini before pulling on a peach cover-up that I left open and untied. "I've already blue-balled the living hell out of Mason. I might as well take him to his limit before letting him…"

"Fuck your brains out."

"Yes."

My heart was beating out of control at just the thought of it, but I couldn't wait anymore. I needed Mason. I needed to feel him, every part of him and considering how careful he'd been with me thus far I knew the ball was in my court. So tonight was the night. I'd made the decision on the plane and surprisingly, there were no nerves. I hadn't had sex in months, I hadn't had *good* sex in years, and I'd only ever been with two other men in my life but I wasn't afraid of whether or not I'd satisfy Mason. Just the ways he looked at me had me feeling beyond good enough, and the fact that he got hard almost every time I touched him pumped me with the confidence and total reassurance that I had nothing to be nervous about tonight.

"Gotta say, way to break a dry spell, lady," Sofia said, taking my hand as we made our way out of her room and through the hall. "Mase is a good man."

"I never thought I'd say this, but I agree."

"That said, you still better make him work for it tonight."

"Oh, don't worry," I laughed. "I plan to."

* * *

The infinity pool at the resort looked about ten times as big as the one at Noah's TriBeCa apartment and rather than views of city lights, it boasted grassy mountains, moonlight and stars beaming over the never ending ocean. At each corner of the pool were four cabanas, their saffron curtains pulled open to show off the plush couches and chaise lounges inside. But they remained mostly empty since the younger guests of the Leo-Tully wedding were all gathered around the pool, either splashing inside or sitting at the edges with their legs dipped in, beachy garnished cocktails in hand.

I plucked the maraschino cherry off my piña colada and popped it into my mouth, shaking my damned head as I eyed Mason. He had clearly taken his dip with Noah already because he was still dripping wet and looking downright lick-able in his black swim trunks. Blatantly ogling him, I had to remind myself that technically, at least in this moment, that man was mine. That athletic build with all those wet, godly muscles reflecting more than their fair share of moonlight – that was mine to run my hands all over and sink my frickin' teeth into if I wanted.

"Spotted," Sofia smirked when Mason's gaze found me from across the pool. It sparkled with the same instant need that I'd seen in his eyes at Noah's party but this time, he sat stunned as I went over to him, letting the gentle breeze blow my robe lightly open.

"I have a new proposal that we take back everything I said on the plane," he said, pulling me to sit sideways on his lap when I reached him.

"Nah," I smirked. "This is your punishment."

"For what? Decades of being an asshole before I met you?"

"Yes."

"Well considering how much it already hurts, I'd say it's pretty fitting," Mason said, running his hands over my bare legs. I knew there were people doing everything from peeking at us to flat-out watching us, but I was no longer self-conscious about having an audience. I had better things on my agenda – like simply watching Mason touch me as if it were all he wanted to do for the remainder of the night. Running his hand along my cover-up, he pushed it slightly open to expose one lacey white triangle. Seated on him, his mouth was at the level of my breast. I writhed a little.

Catching the look in his eyes, I was convinced for a second that he'd shove me down right there and tear the bikini clean off my body. Instead, he looked up at me. "Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you are?" he asked seriously.

The breeze blew my hair against his carved cheekbones. "I think I might now."

"Good," Mason murmured, his blue eyes fixated on mine. "But I don't think you know," he wet the slow curve of his lips, "just how fucking long I've thought you were."

"What?"

"The sexiest, most fucking beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on."

My heart fluttered. "Then tell me." I settled in on his lap. "Tell me your first memory of me."

Mason broke into a gorgeous smile. "Honestly? It's not that romantic because it was through text. Aaron was pretty pleased with himself so he sent me some pictures of the girl he was seeing. I'll admit my reaction was to call him and ask where the fuck he'd found you."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Really now. What picture was it?"

"Just some shot of you sitting across from him at a restaurant. It was summer and it was outside. You were wearing a dress that was… actually a pretty similar material to this," Mason said, thumbing the edge of my bikini bottom, his fingers unknowingly teasing the hell out of me. With a little groan, he laughed to himself. "And something about your smile told me Aaron didn't fucking deserve you, but that was probably irrational. And it was probably just me being annoyed by how smug he was over you."

"I bet," I rolled my eyes, wondering if half of Aaron's motivation to date me came from the fact that he knew Mason liked the way I looked. But I didn't wonder for long because I genuinely didn't give much of a shit about my relationship with Aaron anymore. I was surprised by how little nostalgia I felt for him despite Mason's trip down memory lane. "Well, what about the first memory you have of meeting me in person?" I asked.

"You don't remember?"

"No? Should I?"

"Considering how insanely pissed off you were, yeah. Probably."

I frowned, trying hard to sort through my memories but I couldn't come up with the first time I'd met Mason face to face, or why I would've

already been pissed. Studying the troubled look on my face, Mason laughed.

"Alright, don't hurt yourself," he said, catching my hand before I could smack him. "It was on Aaron's birthday three years ago. You asked him to let you into his apartment and give you the day so you could clean for him and set the place up all nice for whatever dinner you were cooking. You wanted him to stay out with his friends till eight o'clock so you'd have the time to get everything perfect. But I got him shitfaced by six-thirty, so he wound up needing to go home and pass out for a little before mustering up the energy to eat whatever meal you'd just slaved over. It was…" His laugh sounded almost nervous. "Bad. Really fucking bad. I still remember how you looked at me when I carried him into the apartment, and that was the first day we ever met."

"Oh my God." My mouth hung open as I suddenly remembered the day I'd probably pushed from my memory out of pure rage. I was still in my honeymoon stage with Aaron and I'd decided to make his birthday the hugely elaborate affair I'd never had for any of mine, so I spent a week researching recipes, pulling favors from our favorite vendors at Vandermark and gathering the most beautiful array of flowers, candles and dinner ingredients. I ended up with an absolutely perfectly curated spread gathered from the top florists, decorators and gourmet markets from all five boroughs and even some farms upstate. I slept barely a wink the night before because I was so excited to create this masterpiece of an evening for Aaron, but he wound up staggering drunk into the apartment, sleeping through dinner and waking up around midnight to stuff some of my herb roasted lamb loin in his mouth before going back to bed and throwing it up an hour later. "Oh… my God," I breathed, letting the memory sink in. "Oh my God, I'm getting so pissed off just thinking about it again!" I laughed in disbelief, smacking Mason repeatedly and so hard even Noah yelled at me from a few chairs down.

"I'm sorry!" Mason dodged me with a giant grin on his face. "I didn't realize you had all that planned for him. He didn't tell me. And look, I was pretty drunk myself that day but I could already tell when I walked into the apartment and saw you that you were way too fucking good for him. I'd never seen his place that clean and I'd never smelled food that incredible so yeah, definitely the one time in my life I felt jealous of Aaron."

I covered my face with my hands. “My hair was a mess. I remember I was sweating and I was covered in flour and lemon juice and probably a bunch of other stuff.”

“Yeah, well,” Mason laughed. “You still looked better than anything I’d ever laid my eyes on in my life and I remember looking at you and just selfishly fucking wanting you right away.” Mason slipped his hand under my robe, stroking the small of my back. “I think I had ten fantasies about how to steal you from Aaron before you even told me your name,” he muttered, rubbing his jaw as he smirked at himself. “It was pretty rough, but you definitely made it easier on me when Aaron started distancing himself from me. From the family.”

I frowned, confused. “Why?”

“It sucked not seeing him as much, but the bright side was that I did prefer to forget about you. It was easier to pretend you didn’t exist and there wasn’t something out there I couldn’t have. And most of the time, I could do that just fine. I didn’t think about you every day, I promise you that. But then the random nights when I did… when I thought about you and what I knew about you, how good you were to Aaron... it would fucking hurt.”

My voice was small as I ran my finger along his collarbones and down the deep line between his chest. I couldn’t help thinking about his undeniable history with women. “I have a feeling I know what you’d do when it was late at night and you felt down.”

“You’re not wrong about it either,” Mason said honestly, his voice low. “Felt good at the time though. At least I thought it did. But I’m realizing now how much more you feel it when you’re with someone you’ve wanted for awhile. Every touch or kiss or just the way she looks at you – it feels nice with any pretty girl, but with the one you’ve been fantasizing about for years, it’s like a fucking high.” His eyes traced his fingers, which brushed down my calves. “It starts to become an addiction and all you can think about anymore is when you’ll see her next. All the things you want to find out about her – what she looks like happy or sad, how she laughs when she’s nervous. What sounds she’ll make when you touch her a certain way.”

God, Mase. He was describing my own recent feelings to a tee but coming from his mouth, they sounded so goddamned sexy.

“I can relate. To that curiosity… just wanting nonstop to discover more,” I said softly, the blue of Mason’s eyes burning into me in a way that

sparked all my senses. His bare skin felt hotter under my touch. I could hear every dip, every hum and lilt of his voice and it certainly felt like I was seeing differently now. “She’s a lucky girl,” I smiled as Mason leaned into me. “Any chance I know her?”

The way his lips twisted up was irresistible. “I’d say so.”

I was swooning at this point. I didn’t care that Sofia and Noah were laughing at me from the pool either. I was falling and there was no hiding it, so leaning into Mason, I let his sweet lips kiss me. But I’d felt barely a flicker of his tongue before we both found ourselves doused by two giant splashes of water.

“Get a room!” Sofia eyes twinkled impishly as she clung to the edge of the pool, laughing with Noah and several others. “Seriously, you have a room, so use it. Like… now.”

As she wiggled her eyebrows, I plucked the pineapple slice from my drink and chucked it at her. “I’ll do what I want to do when I want to do it.”

“Fine!” Sofia huffed, splashing me once more before swimming away. I laughed as Mason yelled after her, both of us blinking water from our eyes. He was still running a hand over his face when I got up from his lap to shed my soaked cover-up. But once his eyes found me again, they lit up like diamonds.

“Christ.” His stare devoured me as he rose to his feet and grabbed me like I might disappear if he didn’t. “Taylor, you look fucking…” He cursed at his own loss of words. “I’ll do anything if you let me take you to our room right now.”

I smiled. “Why? Your permission to touch me ends once we get back to our room. Remember?”

“I hate this game. I don’t want to play it anymore.”

“I do,” I grinned as he held my waist tight and kissed my neck. I breathed out hard when I felt his tongue flick over me, drawing a wet, hot line along my tingling skin.

“You’re fucking twisted,” Mason smirked against the underside of my jaw. As his fingertips snuck under the edges of my bikini top, he nipped at me, getting me so painfully hot and bothered. Rolling my head back, I closed my eyes, far too aroused to care about the fact that we were in plain view of the guests of his brother and my ex’s wedding. The engagement itself was built upon tackiness and bad taste, so surely it didn’t matter if I decided to show a little PDA with Mason at the hotel – even if it was the

kind that had me briefly cupping his package and squeezing till he gave me that deep, masculine grunt. “Fuck, what are you trying to do to me, Taylor?” Mason whispered pleadingly.

I didn’t answer, only wrapping my arms around his neck and going on my tiptoes to kiss him. My tongue teased his, darting quickly between his lips and disappearing, repeating over and over till he groaned in frustration and slammed me against his chest with two handfuls of my ass. When I gasped, he pounced, thrusting his tongue into my mouth and sweeping voraciously through me, without an ounce of apology.

“God, I can feel how hard you are,” I whispered, my smile pressed against his.

“Only you get me this fucking hard,” Mason muttered. “You have no fucking idea, Taylor. You don’t know how many times I’ve fantasized about you.”

“Tell me.”

“I lost count awhile ago, but trust me when I say I’ve thought way too many times about sucking on those perfect tits and burying every inch of my cock inside you. I’ve waited long and hard for you, Taylor.” Mason’s tone was intense, his shallow breaths serrated. One firm squeeze of my left breast and I gasped again, pushing off of his body. I scolded him with the wicked look in my eye.

“How much longer can you wait?” I asked, my heart pounding.

“I’ve been at my limit for a long fucking time.”

His hard voice made me chew my lip. “No,” I shook my head. “You haven’t reached your breaking point if you’re still standing here and I still have my clothes on.”

Mason groaned angrily. “*Fuck*, Taylor, seriously. What are you trying to do to me right now?”

I released my lip from between my teeth. “I just want to see what you’re going to do to me after all these years of waiting. And I want to see how much longer you can wait. The longer you do, the better it’ll feel.”

“God, you seriously are fucking evil sometimes,” Mason hissed, his square jaw clenched tight. But he let me go and waltz off to find Sofia, who was already cracking up by the time I joined her, Noah and a few others in one of the cabanas.

“You’re fucking asking for it now,” Noah smirked as we eyed Mason from across the pool. The second I left him, he was quickly flanked by girls

he seemed to know judging from the familiar way they said hi. “He’s hating small talk a million times more than usual right now,” Noah snorted as Mason did his best to socialize without looking like some tortured caged beast. His every muscle was flexed in silent irritation as he leaned back on the balcony, barely managing a smile for the chattering girls around him.

God, I’m definitely in for it now, I grinned as I lounged on the chaise. Climbing forward on my hands and knees, I let Mason watch as I slowly lowered myself to lie on my stomach. Somehow, just the position I was laying in had his lip curling, his bicep bulging as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“Let’s see what happens when I do this,” Noah muttered, resting his hand on my shoulder. “Uh oh. Oh shit, he doesn’t like that,” he laughed, sliding his touch slowly down my back and watching Mason’s eyes cloud over with a death look that would’ve had me fearing for Noah’s life if he weren’t Mason’s best friend. It was probably also the only reason he hadn’t already stormed over and grabbed me. He knew his best friend had no interest in me. But then Noah’s hand brushed over the knot of my bikini.

“You’re playing with fire, van Daal,” Sofia warned in a song.

He ignored her. And the second he played with the ends of the bow, giving the slightest little tug, Mason launched off the balcony and left his conversation without a word spoken.

There was the breaking point.

My mouth fell open as I watched him come, his patience visibly fading with every step he took toward me. I scrambled to my knees on the couch, every inch of my body lit on fire as I anticipated him – his touch, his skin, all that pent up lust and fury he’d been saving for up for me. I gasped and covered my shriek of a giggle when he finally came over and claimed me, grabbing me at the waist and throwing me easily over his broad shoulder. My hands clasped to my mouth as he marched me out of sight from the party, falling away only once he’d taken me into the furthermost cabana. Yanking the rope, he untied the curtains, letting them fall shut before tossing me onto the bed and climbing on top of me.

“I can’t wait anymore,” Mason growled, ripping the triangles of my bikini apart. He groaned when my breasts sprung free, kneading them in his hands for a hasty second before sucking my nipples into his mouth, swirling his tongue till they stiffened into peaks so tight it almost hurt. But I felt nothing but pleasure, curling my fingers against Mason’s muscled shoulders

and raking them down the perfect V of his back, wordlessly begging him to give me more. Anything. I wanted his tongue, his breath, his fingers, his cock. I could feel it straining furiously against his trunks and all I wanted was to feel it ease inside me then plunge in with a force.

"I can't wait either," I panted as Mason pushed my bikini bottoms aside, sliding his fingers inside me. He cursed immediately.

"Fuck, baby, you're so wet for me." Mason tunneled his fingers inside me, watching my lips part wider and wider for him. "Christ, I can't believe how fucking wet you are," he muttered before clenching his jaw and groaning that he didn't have a condom.

"In the robe," I panted, a despaired sound escaping my chest when Mason lifted his weight from my body, getting off of me for the short second it took to snatch my cover-up from the ground. "Let me," I breathed, grabbing it, my cheeks flushed as Mason watched me find the condom and tear the wrapper apart. By the time I was done, he had his cock out and resting heavy in his palm, looking hard as a rock and so fucking delectable I had to moan and reach to touch it. "Let me feel it, Mason, please."

"I will," he murmured hoarsely. "I need you to take everything off for me first, baby. Get naked for me."

His eyes refused to break from their stare on me as I fully undressed for him, tearing my bikini off and writhing out of my bottoms as he rolled the rubber onto his shaft – over every thick, hard inch that had me desperately squeezing my breasts till Mason growled and lowered himself on top of me me, drawing the flat of his tongue over my tight nipple and teasing my wet pussy with the flared tip of his cock. It pulsed against me, sending a million little aches to my core and forcing every desperate, filthy plea of need to burst from my lips. They lit a fire behind Mason's eyes.

"Tell me again, Taylor," he rasped greedily. "Tell me how much you want my cock."

"I need it." Back arched, nails dug in his skin, I begged him. "I need you inside me," I breathed achingly. Every second he made me wait turned my desire into pain and it made me wonder how the hell he could've waited so long when I couldn't wait two seconds.

"Say it."

"I need your cock," I moaned, feverish, loving and hating the way he rumbled with delight over my anguished desperation. "I need it now. I – " My jaw dropped as he pushed between my saturated folds. Clinging to his

neck, shock held my mouth wide open. He had only inches of himself inside me and already, I felt spread apart, the throbbing head of his cock so much thicker than it looked, stretching me so perfectly around him I could hardly breathe. I made barely a sound when he finally thrust inside me, every inch of his steel spearing me and filling me to the hilt with gratification.

"Fuck!" The sharp growl expelled from his lips once he was fully inside me. "Jesus Christ, you feel so fucking good, Taylor," Mason growled, moving swiftly but powerfully inside me, his every solid pump between my legs drawing a deep, throaty groan from his lips. I arched my back, grabbing handfuls of his ass. God, I was somewhere else now. Completely out of my mind with satisfaction. His touch, his sounds, his rhythmic rocking – everything turned the heat of my body up higher by the second. "Look at me, Taylor." I obliged his command, feeling the sudden lock of two magnets when our eyes met. "Tell me how good my cock makes you feel."

I shook my head as I moaned, barely able to get any words out. "Can't…"

"You will. Tell me. Tell me how wet your pussy is for me, Taylor."

I tangled my fingers in his hair, drunk off the sound of his ramming into me. "You can hear it," I whispered.

"Mmm, I can and it's like music to my fucking ears," Mason rumbled against my lips as he crushed his kiss over my mouth. Every inch of his body was rock solid as he worked his pace up till he was slamming ferociously inside me, each stroke longer, more forceful than the last. The sound alone had me wild and I could feel myself squeezing around him, my insides tightening and threatening me with an orgasm unlike any I'd ever had in my life.

"Don't stop, Mason," I exhaled. "Please, don't stop."

He took those words as *go harder* and I didn't object. I was just grateful for the intensity of his kiss because I needed something, anything to shut me up as Mason fucked me with abandon, tempting the ecstasy to spill from my lips. The blood was rushing so fast in my ears now that I could tune out any other sounds if I wanted to, and I did. I wasn't sure what was happening around the pool and I didn't want to know. I wanted to drown in the pleasure Mason drilled into me with such ferocity now that I was ready

to explode, too lost to pay any mind to what I subconsciously knew was an escalating problem outside. Stubbornly, I ignored it.

But then it forced itself upon me.

The sounds of muttering and jostling outside the cabana faded into my ears only seconds before it was too late and as the curtains ripped open, a sharp gasp ripped from the throat. I pushed Mason off of my body just as I heard a voice snarl, “What the *fuck*, Taylor!” I didn’t have to turn to know who it was but I did, covering myself with my hands as I found my eyes suddenly staring into the ones I hadn’t seen in months.

It was Aaron.

Chapter Eighteen

Wrapped in just my soaked robe, I trembled behind the wall of Mason's body, my fury trampled by the shock of what Aaron looked like as Noah held him back. It hadn't been that long since I'd seen him and yet I didn't recognize this man. Not because of any physical changes – he still stood six feet tall with light brown hair, cut close and styled neatly. His face was still clean-shaven and he was still dressed in the usual blue button-down and jeans. But his chest was puffed all the way out, his face blood red and his eyes wild as he thrashed toward me.

"Let me fucking talk to her!" he balled his fists, having already chewed out Mason as the party cleared. I could barely make out what the hell he was saying in his rabid fury, but I knew he had to be as pissed as he was because he believed in his heart that I hadn't and would never sleep with Mason. But then of course he walked in on us – naked, panting and undeniably together. "I can't fucking believe this. I swear to God, I'm two seconds from losing my *fucking* mind so for Christ's sake, just let me talk to her!"

"Calm down before I let you go anywhere near her," Mason snarled, matching Aaron's every side step in order to keep me shielded. "I mean it, Aaron, calm the fuck down."

"What, you think I'm gonna hit her?" Aaron's laugh was high-pitched and reedy, sounding almost unhinged. "If you think that you clearly don't fucking know our relationship."

"I did before you left her out of the goddamned blue, so maybe neither of us know you as well as we thought we did," Mason bit back, still staring Aaron down as he reached behind his own back for my hand. I took it, letting him give me a comforting squeeze that told me everything would be okay. But it didn't feel that way because all it took was Aaron looking down at our entwined hands for him to lose it again.

"Oh, come the fuck on – if you two are really together, why the hell would you think it'd be okay to come to my wedding? Huh?"

"Why the hell did you think it was okay to leave your fiancée to marry my ex, you fucking idiot?" Mason challenged. "It's no different than you being with Eva, Aaron. If I have to accept the fact that you're with my ex, you have to accept the fact that I'm with yours."

Aaron slowed his thrashing against Noah. “Are you serious?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you can’t fucking compare that!” he muttered defensively.

“Why not?” I finally demanded. I hugged Mason’s arm to my chest as I stepped forward to cut my eyes at Aaron. “What do you really think is the difference, Aaron?”

He looked freshly shocked as he gaped at me, letting his eyes take me in, traveling from my face to my body. “What’s the difference?” He stared unblinkingly through the wetness of my robe. “The difference is I’m not my brother. I’m not someone who fucks any pretty thing with long legs or a nice rack. I’m *marrying* Eva, who he never even gave a shit about. Right, Mase? Did you?” he inquired with mock curiosity, tilting his head like a fucking parrot. “You didn’t even know her middle name till you saw the wedding invitation. Right? So that’s the difference. You never cared about Eva – but Taylor? I care about her and I can’t even have the fucking relief of knowing you’re taking care of her because everyone here knows you’re just sticking your dick in her to get back at me!”

“That’s not what this is.” Mason broke free from me to growl inches from Aaron’s face. He was only slightly taller than his brother but somehow, he dwarfed him as he stood enraged before him. “In case you didn’t realize considering the way you abandoned her, this woman’s the best thing that’s ever happened to you. And it’s not just you, you little shit, she’d be the best thing to happen to any man who’s lucky enough to have her so don’t fucking run your mouth telling me what I have with Taylor, because you clearly have trouble recognizing when something is too good to be anything but real.”

I could feel the air stripped from my lungs. They weren’t even meant for me but Mason’s words had me floating so high I had to clutch him to stay on my feet. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, resting my forehead on his arm so I could feel the words sink in. Of course, Aaron wouldn’t let me have the moment for long.

“Don’t fuck around, Mase. She’s just another conquest before you move onto the next. You don’t care about anything besides that tight little pussy between her legs.”

“Watch your fucking mouth.”

“Or what?” Aaron challenged, something manic about the laughter behind his eyes. “I’ll hurt the feelings you don’t even fucking have, Mase?

Give me a break. I'm your brother. I've known you my entire life and I know for a goddamned fact that you didn't magically fall for her."

"I think we've already established that you don't know shit."

Aaron sneered cruelly. "For fuck's sake, it's *Taylor* we're talking about here, so if you really believe any of the bullshit you're even saying, it's only because she just fucked you stupid."

"You're an asshole," I hissed immediately, hating that there were suddenly tears in my eyes. Aaron was already backtracking but I shook my head, letting go of Mason and storming past all three of them. "Screw it, Aaron. I'm not here for your approval," I said, feeling either defeated or liberated – I wasn't even sure. "I'm just here to move on like you clearly have but fuck it, I can move on at home, so enjoy your life."

"Wait!"

There were two sets of footsteps following me now and I knew they belonged to Mason and Aaron.

"Taylor, *wait*." Aaron's hand caught my wrist and squeezed for all of a second before Mason had him yanked back. I spun around expecting to see a fight but what I saw instead was Aaron's dogged pursuit of me, pain flashing in his light eyes as I looked at him with disgust. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I've learned to stop giving a shit what you meant."

"Baby, please, just let me explain for a second!"

I winced just as Mason's lip curled over "baby." Aaron wore a pleading look now, but I couldn't bring myself to feel remotely bad as I let Mason come to me and circle a protective arm around my waist. "I told you I'm not your baby, Aaron. And you've already tried and failed to explain."

"Just give me one second to talk to you in private, Taylor," he whispered desperately. "I can't stand to see you with him. You know I fucking can't. You know how much this hurts me!"

"Yeah, and the way you feel now? That's how I felt when I held the invitation to your wedding in my hand. When I found out that you hadn't left me because you got cold feet – you left me because you decided to trade up for a better bride," I said coldly. "Well, guess what, I decided to trade up too, and you can either accept that or you can back out of yet another wedding and be the world's biggest coward for the second time this year."

“And if I did that, would you leave him?” Aaron returned shamelessly.

Mason started at him with a fury he quickly contained – maybe because I pulled him back, maybe because he realized we’d wanted this. Exactly this. Forcing Aaron to question his engagement was our whole plan but with the question he’d just blurted at me, I felt suddenly at odds with the mission. I sensed that Mason did too.

“Answer me,” Aaron urged tremulously. “Please.”

The silence thickened the breezy night air. I’d never felt such tension in my life and yet somehow, I found myself almost wanting to laugh. “You don’t get answers right when you want them, Aaron,” I finally said, my voice steady. “I wanted answers from you too, but you didn’t answer my calls, my texts, my emails or voicemails. I cried alone countless nights trying to figure those answers out on my own while you were off living the life with Eva. Popping bottles of champagne and giving yourself permission to forget about the person you loved for three years because that was easier, that felt better. So guess what? I’m doing that tonight.” I let Mason’s hand take mine as I glared unapologetically at Aaron. “And you can sit around and wonder the way I did.” With that, I murmured to Mason, “Let’s go.”

And we did.

* * *

Fucked up.

That was what this was. Not what just happened at the pool with Aaron – what was happening right now on the balcony of Mason and my suite. I was supposed to be wretched. I was supposed to be in tears, torn up over the fact that I’d just seen my ex-fiancé, that his words had been everything from hateful to wounded as he lashed out at me for moving on from him the way that I did.

But I wasn’t any of that.

My breaths were ragged as I closed my eyes, white-knuckling the railing of the balcony. *This is fucked up*, I told myself as I absorbed every furious thrust behind me with a guiltless, lip-smacking pleasure. Instead of feeling heartbroken, filled with grief, I was in ecstasy, filled with the brutal heat and deep pleasure of Mason’s cock piercing inside me. There was still some anger, some fire trickling in from our spat at the pool but we gladly

put that energy to use. His hand encompassing my throat, Mason held me exactly where and how he wanted me, his free hand groping my breast, squeezing me hard as he slammed in and out of my soaked pussy. He was strong, merciless – easily shattering my idea of what good, hard sex was. Whatever notion I had before was a pitiful joke compared to the complete possession I felt with Mason. He was a natural, effortlessly dominant in the way his hands slid all over my body, positioning me swiftly to his liking. And whatever was good for him I was sure was better for me because I'd never felt this storm brewing inside me before. I'd already come once, my breasts shaking in his hands as he pumped pleasure inside me. I'd already experienced my best orgasm yet but Mason was still going, convincing me that he had more for me – that the best was yet to come.

And I believed him.

"This is all I want, Taylor." His sharp whisper cut through the silent night. Sliding his hand from my throat to my jaw, he hooked his fingers against my lip. "This mouth is the only fucking mouth I want. I want it first thing in the morning. I want it to be the last thing I taste at night. I don't want to hear it say any other man's name, do you hear me?" he panted in my ear.

"Yes," I breathed eagerly. "Only yours."

With a groan, he dropped his hand so both squeezed my breasts, giving himself leverage to fuck me with a carnal rage from behind. "And these tits," he grunted fiercely, his long fingers wrapping tight around me, massaging firmly till I gave him a moan. "These fucking beautiful tits are mine."

"You can have anything, just don't stop," I begged from the pit of my throat. His lips spread in a grin against the back of my neck as he reached around to my front.

"I won't." That velvet reassurance smoothed over my skin as he played gently with my clit. "Not till I hear you come again." His fingers tangled in my hair, Mason stroked my swollen pearl, all the while keeping the rhythm of his measured thrusts inside me. "I don't ever want to stop." God, it was the best thing I could possibly hear. I gasped for breath as he held me still and took over completely. I wasn't used to relinquishing all control but with Mason, I reveled in it – in the sound that came with his cock driving balls-deep inside me with every stroke. "Come for me,

Taylor," he demanded, his fist pulsing gently around my hair. "I need to hear you come for me."

I whimpered, the tension building with a surging force in my core. "Let me look at you when I come," I whispered, gasping when Mason withdrew from inside me, leaving me with a painful emptiness I'd have never asked for if I knew how it felt. It was barely a second as he carried me from the balcony to the bed but in my mind, it was an eternity and I was already begging desperately for him once my back hit the mattress. But as his exquisite body hovered above me, I forgot the void and realized this was worth it – watching those abs ripple, those eyes blaze into mine as his cock nudged against my pussy and entered me again. I fisted the sheets as I moaned, our eyes locked in the same trance as we rocked against each other, the passion between us like a humid air I could taste.

Slick and sliding against each other, our bodies clenched and begged for release. But the euphoria was so unreal we both refused to let it go. Our pleasure was at capacity and now I could finally understand what Mason said before – about being stretched to his limit without breaking. Because I felt it now. We were ready to come but like masochists, we held out, prolonging the final gratification. My nails dug into his skin as the thrust of his hips grew shorter, tighter – each taut push between my legs joined by a grunt between his gnashed teeth.

"Do you feel what you fucking do to me?" Mason hissed against my neck as his cock swelled harder inside me. "You're going to make me come harder than I ever have in my life, Taylor. You drive me fucking crazy." Slow and steady before, his tempo quickened again, his strokes precise, his hot breaths knifing through the air. I was in sensory overload as he kissed my breasts and licked them as if they were his last meal. When I finally came, the sound of my cry brought him with me. The room filled with the roar of his pleasure as a vicious orgasm shook through every inch of his incredible body.

When he collapsed on top of me, I stroked his cheek. I felt the throbbing of his cock still heavy and half-hard between my legs. I relished the awe mixed with content in his eyes, and every hot breath from his mouth that brushed against my swollen lips. Under the strength of his weight, I lay in bliss, in my own private paradise as I simply watched him watch me.

There was no need for answers tonight.

I had questions for Mason before we left for St. Lucia, and I promised myself I'd dare to get them when we came back but I didn't need them anymore. I hadn't been certain of anything in a long time, but securely wrapped in Mason's arms, the air dancing with all the words we didn't have to say, I was certain. I had lost control and fallen hard, but it didn't matter.

Because he had done just the same.

Chapter Nineteen

If there was any doubt about what I'd felt last night, it was vanquished in the morning because while the wedding was still on, Mason was ready to go. Standing among the bags we'd barely unpacked, I tried to slow him down and let him think.

"But what about your mom?" I asked gently, thinking about how Clara would not only lose her younger son but know forever that his last interaction with Mason had been downright awful. Freshly showered, his towel loosely knotted over his hips, Mason sank to a seat at the edge of the bed.

"I don't know," he sighed. "I'll have to tell her he made his choice."

"He was doubting himself last night. You saw that."

"I did." Mason lifted his gaze to me. "But if calling the wedding off takes you saying you'll take him back, I don't care to see it happen anymore. I know you wouldn't actually go back to him. I know you want nothing to do with him anymore. But if you say those words, he'll hold them against you and harass you for… I don't know how long, but long enough to continue being a part of your life, and that's not fair to you. You deserve to move on from him and just live again."

"Mason." Appreciation welled in my chest as I stood before him at the bed, letting him pull me in by the backs of my thighs. "I obviously want that, and trust me, I don't want to stay here any longer myself. I was ready to go the second I laid eyes on Aaron last night. But I also don't want you to go home and feel like you didn't do enough to try and save your family for your mom." I smoothed my thumbs over his hollow cheeks as I held his face. "To some degree, I know her pain. I know what it feels like to lose something precious and then pin all your hopes and dreams on one person. And Aaron is clearly the wrong person for anyone to depend on but your mother deserves him. He's her son. She carried him for nine months and raised him for eighteen years. Losing him after all the time honestly sounds worse to me than – " I cut off. *Twelve weeks*.

Just shy of it, actually. But there was no need to finish that sentence because I didn't want to talk about my past anymore, and Mason knew exactly what I was going to say. Bringing me to my favorite position on his lap, he wrapped my arms around his strong neck and held me against his

bare chest. Over the soft T-shirt I'd worn to bed, he kissed me – pressing his lips gently between my breasts, along the tops of them then finally, against the heart-shaped valley between collarbones. Then he looked in my eyes and like yesterday, I could read the words in his heart. All three of them. *God, just say it, Mason*, I thought before promptly changing my mind. *No, don't say it*. I didn't know what to feel, how I would react if he did. It was too fast for those words and I was more likely to be struck by lightning than hear them from Mason Leo, but I sensed them so clearly it felt like I could trace them with my fingers if I wanted.

To my disappointment and relief, they didn't manifest in his lips.

"We'll give it one more shot," Mason concluded. Then his mouth curled in a smirk. "Might as well considering the 4AM craziness they sent us."

"True."

It had been comical, almost. Despite our exhaustion in bed last night, Mason and I had gone for round two. It was unplanned. We were sweaty and sticky so we jumped in the shower and though it started with just my lips wrapped around his cock, it ended with Mason lifting my feet off the ground, wrapping my legs around his narrow hips and pounding me so hard against the marble tile I couldn't think about how loudly I was screaming his name. It simply wasn't a priority.

And maybe there had been a knock at the door. Maybe I hadn't heard it but I had a feeling Aaron had at some point dropped by, because shortly after we emerged from the shower, there were texts in our phone – from Aaron and Eva, respectively. I didn't ask to read the message Mason received, but I hoped it wasn't anywhere near as dramatic as mine.

Taylor, I can't sleep. I can't think about anything but how furious I am with you and how sorry I am to you. If you want me to admit it, I'm jealous. I am as fucking disgusted as I am jealous that you let him fuck you like that. I want a chance to remind you that I can make you feel better than he does but I know that after what I did to you, you'll never give me that chance so at least let me know that you don't hate me. I'm a fucking ball of fury, heartache and regret and I don't know how to let all those feelings live inside me at once. It fucking hurts Taylor. I fucked up. I'm a coward. That much I know but I've made my bed so I'll sleep in it. Just let me have a good memory of you before you go. Even if none of us mean it inside and we're all still secretly wishing we could rip each other's throats out, let's

just fake it. For the sake of the last memories we get of each other, let's just sit together and talk and pretend we're okay with each other's new lives. You don't have to come to my wedding. I would prefer that you didn't. But at least see me tomorrow morning. You'll meet my future wife, I'll make amends with my brother and then we'll move on like strangers or at least two people who don't still love each other. I'm begging you, Taylor. Please.

For the second time, I stared at the text Aaron had sent last night. I laughed as Mason read me the much less dramatic but passive aggressive yet somehow flirty texts Eva had sent him, which included an official invitation to brunch with their friends on the resort's beachside terrace.

We decided to go.

We were already seconds from going home, so it seemed mostly harmless to stay a couple hours longer and at least try to achieve that moment of peace between the two couples. It was in Mason and my own interest too – to have Aaron out of our hair if we wanted to explore whatever bud of a real romance there was between us. So rather than make toward the helipad, we prepared ourselves for a truce over brunch with the soon-to-be bride and groom.

Mason kissed the back of my neck as he zipped me up into the nude dress he had purchased for me that day we ran into Whitney. Then perched at the edge of the bed, I watched him change freely in front of me, still struck from head to toe by his stone-carved magnificence. Amusingly enough, I wasn't dreading going to brunch because I didn't want to see my ex with his model fiancée. I was dreading it because I knew it would be torture for me to sit at least an hour without being able to crawl all over Mason and put my hands all over his body. Judging from how he pushed me against the wall and kissed me hungrily for several minutes before we let the room, he felt the same way.

Now that the seal was broken between us, we couldn't get enough.

But we had all the time to explore each other once we got back to New York, and knowing that made my heart just about sing. I just needed to survive the next hour or two, and then I could have as much Mason Leo as I could possibly ask for – in my apartment, his apartment, his office, wherever.

And I couldn't wait.

"Ready to go?" Mason asked, holding the door open for me. I laughed, adjusting the sweetheart neck of my dress and watching his eyes

follow me out into the hall.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Chapter Twenty

Considering the mess that was last night at the pool, it was almost hilarious to see all the same faces gathered around brunch this morning in their Sunday best. Rather than swim trunks and string bikinis, there were now linen shirts, pressed white pants and tea-length dresses. Matching were the bride and groom, Aaron wearing a striped pink tie over his white shirt to balance the rosy, crisscross halter dress that Eva wore painted to her lithe body. Her honey-colored hair was neatly pinned into a braided side bun that nicely complemented her razor-sharp jaw as well as the ladylike manners she'd polished for her pre-wedding brunch.

Of course, I saw flashes of that fiery temper she made famous in her viral video trashing Mason's office. She had been perfectly cordial while greeting us, and even sweet to me by complimenting my dress, but it wasn't long before Eva was peering over at me with rapidly declining politeness. She tried to hide the first few glances but as the meal went on – especially with Aaron staring at me on her left, and Whitney Decker whispering in her ear on her right – the green-eyed monster inched forward to rear her ugly head.

But it started small.

"Wow. You really finished that fast," she smiled, interrupting the table's conversation to point out my empty plate. It would be a possibly harmless remark from someone else, but there was no set of ears at the table that didn't read between the lines of Eva's words, especially since she let her gaze fall briefly to my stomach.

But while Mason was more than half to blame for my cleanly finished entree, I said nothing to defend myself. "It was delicious," I returned her smile, taking a sip of my water. I waited for another remark from her but there was nothing and shortly after, the conversation returned to where the bridesmaids had purchased their dresses. So for the moment, I was in the clear.

"You're a fucking champ, by the way," Mason murmured in my ear, a laugh in his voice as he draped his arm over my shoulder. "You deserve a reward for sitting through this."

"The plane ride home with you is reward enough."

"I already know exactly what I want to do to you."

I grinned as I smoothed the napkin on my lap. “You had the time to think about that already?”

“Vividly. Should I kick Sofia and Noah off our flight so we can have some privacy?”

“Maybe.” I slid my eyes across the table to Sofia but instead, I found Aaron. He had a blank look on his face as he watched me try to suppress my giggled. I averted my gaze, eager to be looking at anything else as Mason made me squirm with husky whispers of all the dirty, bad things he had in store for me. “Not now,” I scolded him in a giggle but it was too late – Eva had caught Aaron looking again and with both Leo brothers’ attention rapt on me, she was growing quickly livid.

“I do think it would’ve looked better on you,” she declared, sipping champagne as she stared at me. I was briefly confused until I realized that despite her dark eyes on me, Eva was talking to Whitney. *Oh dear God.* They were talking about my dress – the one I had been trying on when Mason and I put Whitney in her place. Reaching for Mason’s hand, I squeezed, letting him know that there might be trouble ahead – if not trouble, then at least some considerable bullshit.

“Everything okay?” he murmured under his breath, oblivious to the subtle put-downs slowly coming at me from down the table.

“I’m not sure,” I answered truthfully, waiting for the direct insult to hit. But it didn’t come and I was thankful for it because it wasn’t long before I found myself miraculously laughing in a conversation that included Sofia, Mason *and* Aaron. The dessert that came out was what sparked the nostalgia – a lemon meringue pie that naturally reminded Sofia of her attempt to make one for Thanksgiving last year. Her hand mixer had broken, so she wound up bringing her giant bowl of egg whites to dinner and passing it between Mason and Aaron to hand whip since they were “the strongest.” Of course, the giant bowl of egg white wound up divided into two – Aaron’s idea so he and Mason could each whip their own and see whose turned into meringue first.

“I think they bet like, one dollar. And Aaron was convinced he was done first even though we all said he wasn’t, so I told him to turn the bowl upside down over his head to test it,” Sofia snorted, preemptively cracking up at what happened next. Even Eva’s lashes were fluttering with curious amusement. She actually looked incredibly sweet when she laughed.

“Then what happened?” she asked.

“God, I don’t know, Aaron, what happened?” Sofia asked with her trademark sass. The entire table looked to him as he covered his face in shame for a second and then laughed.

“I knew I was wrong so I wouldn’t do it. But everyone wanted to test the meringue now, and all the nieces and nephews wanted to see what happened when the bowl got turned upside down, so I had to do it,” Aaron said. Then he grimaced and shook his head. “But my mom saw how much I didn’t want to get fucking egged in my nice clothes so she, uh… basically martyred herself and said, ‘Turn the bowl over me.’”

The table collectively gasped as Eva smacked him. “Aaron Leo, you did not!” she cried, scoring points with me for looking appropriately appalled. “Tell me you didn’t do that to the poor woman.”

Aaron dragged his hands over his face, covering it in pure shame. “I did,” he groaned, sending the table into uproarious shock and laughter. But before anyone could give Aaron too hard of a time, Sofia supplied the true ending of the story.

“But he was actually right and the meringue was done,” she said. “Aaron finally beat Mason at something, but he couldn’t even enjoy it because we were judging the shit out of him all night for throwing Aunt Clara in front of the bullet.”

Everyone was laughing hard. Even Mason was, but I bounced my knee under the table, fearful that Aaron might flip and switch and get offended by the ribbing. He was known to do that in the past but when I peered at him, he was surprisingly good-natured.

“Yeah… not my proudest moment and definitely nothing I plan to repeat,” he said, his grin fading to a slight smile as he turned to me. “I still remember how good it was though. That meringue? Sofia got lazy, big surprise, so Taylor finished baking it and God I remember it being the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Oh boy. I chewed my lip, one of several at the table who caught the tone in Aaron’s voice, and the faraway look in his eyes as he gazed at me another second before staring down at his plate. Giggling a second ago, Eva was back to being stiff. Her mouth was stretched into a tight, closed-lipped smile as she sat up so straight I practically heard her back cracking.

“Well. Let’s hope this meringue compares to Taylor’s,” she said, glancing at me as she picked up her fork. Sensing the tension, I looked to Mason but he didn’t seem particularly perturbed. Maybe it was because

he'd put his hand on my knee to stop it from bouncing before and since, his palm had made its way up my thigh.

"Try it," he said, holding a forkful of the dessert off his plate.

"I'm full," I smiled at the glimmer in his eye as he lowered his voice.

"Come on." His grin was so damned irresistible. "Help me get through the rest of this brunch."

"Watching me eat dessert is what helps you get through boredom?"

"Watching you wrap those lips around something, yes."

"If you wait a little longer, you'll get to watch them wrap around something even better," I smirked.

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because the second we get on that plane, I'm bending you over and fucking you, Taylor."

Damn it, Mase. I pushed him away to thwart any blushing but it was too late and I could tell from the way Sofia was nudging a very hung over Noah down the table. I would've smirked and shot them a look but I knew that if they were watching Mason and me, so were Eva and Aaron and without even looking in her direction, I feel Eva's next remark brewing.

"Taylor, you have to try the dessert. I have to know if it compares to your meringue last year," she said, innocuously enough. But my alert was still on high.

"Definitely, but in a bit. I'm pretty stuffed."

"Oh, but you have to try it now, it's *so* good," Eva insisted. "Take off your Spanx if you have to."

Ah. There it is. Hardly surprised, I managed a laugh. "I'm actually not wearing any. This dress is too tight for me to fit another layer underneath."

"That means you should've gotten a size up," Whitney quipped, smiling innocently at me. But then she eyed Eva, the two exchanging a look of mischief before she went on. "Yeah… I know it's like, *in* right now but I just don't ever want to be the curvy type. They just don't look as good in clothes."

Eva touched her lip. "Mm. True."

"Fuckin' news to me."

It a low, almost bored mutter but the entire table heard it and stopped for a second to peer at Mason, who acted oblivious to the attention his

remark at gotten. Checking the time on his phone, he looked up and raised his eyebrows.

"What?" He played dumb. It was the one thing he couldn't pull off and I found it far more charming than I should have. But judging from the little smiles around the table, I wasn't the only one.

"Okay, so we might have to go soon," I whispered in his ear, hardly able to contain my amusement.

"Just say the word," Mason smirked as Eva let out a loud, heavy sigh. It sounded like a preparation for her final act – one last jab to try and bring me down. I couldn't help looking her way again as she spoke, resting her hand on her perfectly flat stomach.

"Yeah… that's why I have to get pregnant soon," she said, gazing down at herself. "I heard your body doesn't bounce back as well after twenty-seven, and I just *know* my pregnancy is gonna do a number on me."

"Why's that?" someone asked curiously.

Eva slid her hand in Aaron's, smiling despite the uneasiness on his face. I felt it, too. I didn't know what it was, but I couldn't help feeling oddly nervous about whatever Eva was about to say.

"Well, I heard it's a tougher pregnancy when you're carrying a boy, and I just feel it in my heart that that's what I'm going to have – a boy," Eva said dreamily, perching her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand. "And when I do, I already have the name picked out for him." She turned her big, innocent eyes to me. "It's going to Nolan."

The screech of my chair pushing out from under the table deafened me. Everyone else, too – I could tell from the wave of audible cringes. I wanted to apologize but the blood was draining fast from my face and my heart was beating out of my chest as I stormed as far from the table as possible, as fast as my feet could bear to take me. I felt instantly sick to my stomach, disgusted with Eva but than that, loathing Aaron for not only leaving me but telling his new fiancée all about the baby I named after the teacher who helped me get to New York – the baby I had lost to the most horrific pain of my life. God, I mean how did that conversation even go? *"By the way, the girl I left you for carried my child for almost three months but then we lost it and it sucked but hey, now I'm with you."* I could barely manage to talk about what happened to even the closest people around me, and yet Aaron blithely told the woman he abandoned me for. And not only was she able to live with taking him from me despite what we went

through, she was able to throw it back in my face for the cheap sake of hurting me, forcing me to cry in front of a table of strangers.

There was a lot I could take, but I couldn't stand that.

And I was done here. I was so incredibly ready to go home.

My heart was pounding out of my chest as I continued away with no direction at all. I had stormed my way to some hallway strewn with flowers when I heard the footsteps behind me. I expected Mason and Aaron, but I suspected I heard even Sofia as well. When I finally spun around I confirmed all three including Noah, who pulled Sofia back to let the brothers rush forward to me.

"I'm sorry," Aaron blurted hastily, horror in his eyes. "That was disgusting. I didn't know she would say that. I swear, I didn't think she could possibly – "

"I don't care about her!" I yelled at him, Mason containing my fury with one arm wrapped around me. I tried powering through his grip to scream straight in Aaron's face but there was no chance of that against his strength, so I simply glared through tears at the man I couldn't even remember loving anymore. "You did this. You made all these choices. You proposed to me, you left me, you didn't have the heart to tell me, but you *did* tell your new girl about our baby boy," I hissed, watching my words cut like blades through Aaron. "And you know what, I expect her to hate me. Even if I weren't with Mason, I would expect her to want to cut me down at least a little, so her behavior is of no surprise to me – but you? I would've thought that despite all the shit you've pulled on me, you'd still be a good enough person to keep at least *Nolan* between the two of us, but you're not." I was breathless, panting. Aaron was already crying, but I cruelly went on. "I don't know. Maybe we just didn't deserve him, Aaron. But whatever it is, I'm done so much as looking at you. I'm done letting you hurt me and I'm moving the hell on, so I urge you to do that too. Enjoy your life with Eva – you deserve each other."

Chapter Twenty-One

Breathe.
Remember. Forget.
Breathe.

It was an odd mantra and it wouldn't make sense to anyone else, but it made sense to me and it helped my heartbeat return to normalcy within an hour on the plane. I just needed to breathe in, remember what I had now, how it was worlds better than what I had in the past, then breathe out.

After all, nothing had actually changed. Nothing from before the brunch with Aaron and Eva had changed except for the fact that I now knew my ex was actually worse than I imagined. But that didn't matter. He was my ex. My past. And I was moving on. I only cried because it was a cheap shot. But that was how cheap shots worked, and everyone had one – that weak spot that could break them down no matter how happy or content they might be. That just so happened to describe me now to a tee: perfectly happy and content, but with a bruise in my soul that wouldn't fail to hurt if you poked it. It was never going to go away, but I was sure that over time, the pain of the bruise would heal and that I could more than live with.

"God, I can't wait to just be home," I said tiredly, my head resting against Mason as we sat on the couch across from the leather seats Sofia and Noah lounged in. While Sofia was very much awake, Noah was unsurprisingly asleep, Mason halfway there himself. But he stayed awake to make sure I was breathing steady again, occasionally burying kisses in my hair.

"Neither can I," he murmured. "But we still have four days after this."

"Four days of what?"

"Your time off," he replied, reminding me that I could very well fit an actual vacation in before returning to work at Vandermark. Across from me, Sofia looked up from her phone to laugh at my look of pleasant astonishment.

"And she's back," she snorted. "Quick, Mase. Brainstorm some places to go and maybe she'll even smile."

I laughed, prompting her and Mason to cheer and stir Noah with irritation from his sleep. "Goddamnit. What's happening?" he muttered,

pulling the hood of his sweater over his eyes.

"We're contemplating a real vacation," Sofia answered. "Like, one where Mason and Taylor aren't there to stop a wedding and cause brouhaha all over the place."

Noah rubbed his eyes. "I don't know, I like brouhaha. In moderation. It's not bad with mezcal."

Everyone stopped. Mason stared hard for three seconds then squinted at Noah. "What in the actual hell are you talking about?" he asked with such seriousness I had to snort against his chest.

Sofia lifted Noah's hood up from his eyes, studying him with a combination of irritation and concern. "We're talking about how we don't want drama during our next vacation, you drunk. That's what brouhaha means. What were you thinking?"

"Oh, I thought it was a liqueur."

"That's Kahlua, you idiot."

I nearly choked from laughing at Sofia's harshness, and at Noah as he sat up and frowned groggily, searching his own head for reasons why he'd confuse those two words. I was smiling so hard my cheeks actually hurt, but I welcomed this pain because it was the first step toward moving on – to the next chapter of my life where hopefully, I'd see more of Noah's unintentional comedy because I'd be spending more time with his best friend. Looking up at Mason, I smiled, enjoying the angle of his gorgeous face while leaning against his chest. I stared at those high cheekbones, that square jaw – all the sharply carved lines that composed his striking features. I considered their symmetry was what made his crooked grin so stunningly sexy when he finally glanced down at me again.

"So what do you think?" he asked, pushing my hair behind my ear.

"Of what?"

"Where you want to spend the next four days. Any place in the world. Name it and I'll take you there."

My heart skipped a beat but then I laughed because my answer was undoubtedly going to have him making fun of me like he did with my birthday wish. "I just want to go home, Mason."

"Really?" He looked mildly disappointed. "I'll take you anywhere, Taylor. I'll take you to fucking Disneyland if you want. I'll hate every second of it but if that's where you want to be, I'll go there with you."

My lips spread in a big grin. "No. I just want to be home."

“Can I ask why?”

My gaze floated away as I thought about it. “I don't know, I just… want to clean my slate and begin my new chapter, and I can’t do that if I’m still lounging on some beach somewhere. I have to be home so I know whatever good I’m feeling isn’t a false start. I want to know that it’s real.”

The humor faded from Mason’s blue eyes as he studied me. Holding my jaw, he tipped my face up, taking another moment to soak me in before surprising me with a kiss. I closed my eyes and just breathed him, so in love with how I felt in his arms, able to touch him, taste him, smell him. I didn’t think the moment could get any better but when he pulled away, Mason gave me that crooked smile. “You know it’s real, right?” he asked in a low murmur.

I blinked, knowing well that we weren’t talking about the same topic anymore. I told myself not to ruin the moment by being explicit, but I couldn’t help myself. “You and me?”

“Yes,” he answered too quickly for me to entertain even the slightest shred of doubt. “I think you figured it out awhile ago but I figure it wouldn’t hurt to be up front about it,” he smiled. “Especially since I’m about to ask you to spend the next four days at my apartment. I know you want to get back to the real world but it’s going to be fucking cold once we get back to New York, and I have no intention of telling the office that I’m available yet. So come home with me.” Mason threaded his fingers through my hair, pressing another sweet kiss to my mouth. “Please. We can be real at my house, I promise.”

God. How could I possibly say no to that?

“Okay,” I whispered. “Then we’ll go to your house,” I said – and as evenly as I could for a girl whose heart was about to burst.

* * *

I was first out as the doors opened for us to exit the aircraft. The instant gust of bitter cold that slapped my face made it seem like the New York winter was eager to bring me down. But nothing could bring me down right now. I toppled a bit in my heels but grabbed the railing as I made my way down the short flight of stairs and onto the tarmac, well prepared for the weather this time in my long coat and thick scarf. But my gloves were somewhere in my luggage so I stuck my hands into my pockets to warm

them, forgetting I'd stuffed my phone into the left side. Upon making contact, it buzzed in my hand.

Really? I hadn't planned on looking at my phone till I got home. Something told me I'd have to deal with some long, mopey speech from Aaron – either that or an insane guilt trip about how I ruined his wedding and how karma would get me. I had already mapped out a dozen different directions in which his inevitable message could go, so I was fairly certain that I was prepared for whatever he had in store for me. But considering how many times I'd been proved wrong in just a matter of weeks, I should've known I was by no means prepared for what he had to say.

Not by a long shot.

Looking at the screen, I confirmed Aaron's message. I told myself I'd just peek at the text without reading it all, but then it started with pictures. Four of them. One being an electronic receipt. Three being images so explicit my stomach instantly turned and I wanted to smash my phone onto the floor. I should have too, but I chose instead to torture myself further, reading the message Aaron had sent at some point during my flight home.

It was so far from what I expected.

It wasn't long. And it wasn't bitter or depressed or laced with insults. It was just facts – cold hard facts that were so impossible to deny that my thumping heart started battering my insides, throttling my brain with dreadful realization, making me feel horrifically bruised all over.

Fuck.

No, no, no, please don't let it be true.

I pressed my hand hard over my mouth because if I didn't, I'd scream. Even as I shut myself up, I wanted to bite my own fingers and let it all out because suddenly, the haunting was back. Those old regrets were back, stronger than ever and joined now by a heartbreak worse than the one Aaron subjected me to because this time, the lie had come from the man I was sure had just healed me – the man who was supposed to help me turn the page to my next chapter.

Goddamnit, Mason.

I burst into tears the second I saw him emerge from the jet. Catching them immediately, his smile for me dropped like a brick and his step quickened down the stairs to catch up as I turned and strode furiously away,

looking for the path to lead me into the airport and maybe onto another plane where I could fly away from everyone.

"Taylor!"

Mason called behind me, his voice sharp with nothing but concern. Appropriate, considering my anguish had only to do with him – and not just my anguish in this moment but every moment I'd experienced in the past two years. It was all on him.

"Taylor, stop! Where are you going?"

"Far away from you," I replied between my teeth.

"What are you talking about? Hey!" His footsteps closed in on me. "Taylor!" He caught my arm and spun me around to face him, the tip of his nose red from the cold, his eyes ablaze as he studied me urgently. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded, the fog of his breath dancing in the frigid air. "Tell me, Taylor!"

"You tell me!" I hissed, jerking my arm out of his grip, my frantic eyes searching his face for something I'd missed – some sign of deceit that I'd just blissfully ignored. But there was nothing. He was still breathtaking and beautiful and it only made the hurt a million times worse. "You know what, Mason – fine. I'll tell you since clearly, you have some issues with honesty!" His jaw went tight and when he didn't protest, I knew I was onto something. "It wasn't Aaron that night," I whispered, watching all forms of expression fall from Mason's face. *Damn it*. I had all the evidence in my hands but it wasn't till he looked at me with shame that I knew it was true. "You know what night I'm talking about. He said he was going to cheat on me. I tried to track him down all over the city and I couldn't find him or stop him so I found Sofia and we drank till I could forget it. And I made myself so sick she got scared and she needed someone to come help. I thought it was him – for *two fucking years*, I knew in my heart that Aaron didn't cheat on me that night because instead, he came to save me. Because he loved me. I was in so much pain that night and I was so goddamned stupid for drinking that much, but I thought it was somehow worth it because of how Aaron came to prove himself to me. I thought it was worth it for how much stronger we came back as a couple after that night," I cried, my tears freezing against my cheeks as the brutal winds whipped my hair against my face. It felt like glass slicing my skin but I paid it no mind as my eyes burned like fire into Mason's. "But it wasn't him that night, was it?"

My teeth rattled in my skull as I stared at Mason shaking his head. “Just fucking say it, Mason!”

“It was me.”

My shoulders crashed as I cried hard, wanting so badly to crumple to the ground. Mason reached out for me but I pushed him away, sobbing as I thought about how my gut feeling was right. Completely and utterly right. I hadn’t felt good about getting back with Aaron after the break because I shouldn’t have. He *did* cheat on me that night. He did have sex with Whitney Decker. And it wasn’t even just once. The texts he’d just sent me included a picture for every round they went for, and they drove his message home with a confirmation of his check-in and checkout times at the hotel where they’d gotten a room. Worse than that, the pictures were all screenshots from Whitney’s phone. He hadn’t even looked at his own that night – hadn’t even known I was in trouble at the bar till he saw all the missed texts and voicemails from Sofia.

By the time he called her back, she told him to forget it, that I was home. And it was then that he listened to the voicemail left by Mason. Once he called him back, they put their stories together. Mason let Aaron pretend it was him and together, they agreed to never speak of the night again.

“I didn’t know he cheated, Taylor, or I would’ve never agreed to let him have it,” Mason said, remorse thick in his voice. “And even then I was going to tell you. We didn’t talk like that but I was going to.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

Grief dragged at his features, his whole posture. “I thought on it for too long. And then it was too late.”

“Because I got pregnant.”

“Yes.”

I was so livid I could hardly see anymore. Then again, it might’ve been the tears. Funny enough, while they blinded me, I could clearly picture the life with Mason that could have started two years if he had just told me the fucking truth. “Had I known the real story,” I murmured shakily, my entire body trembling, “I would have never taken him back. I would have never let him back in my bed. I wouldn’t have let him *touch* me let alone carry his child. I would have saved myself a world of the worst suffering I have ever experienced if you had just told me the truth, Mason! It didn’t have to happen – none of it did!”

I was screaming but I couldn’t stop myself. Sofia and Noah stood frozen by the jet. Others working out side stared at me, but I wasn’t sorry. Not for this. All I was sorry for were the years I’d lost to one lie. When Mason came forward, I stepped sharply back.

“Don’t,” I warned, my voice guttural. “Don’t talk to me. Don’t try to talk to me. Don’t call or see me. Tell Sofia the same. Just leave me alone.”

I could see the hurt my words left in his blue eyes. I could see his body rigid, tortured as he controlled his urge to grab and hold me and kiss away my tears. I wanted it but I didn’t and he knew that. He knew well that he wronged me – that there were consequences to his inaction that I would never forget. So despite the need I could see in his twitching fingers, Mason kept a respectful distance. “I never wanted to hurt you,” he said finally. “I only wanted to protect you.”

“You did the opposite,” I returned straightaway. “You hurt me worse than he did,” I said. I didn’t have to say whom. He knew and he only nodded, chewing back his lip as he accepted my contempt.

We didn’t exchange another word before I left without him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Warming my hands with my coffee, I stared out at the brilliant sheets of fresh powder outside my window. My mood in the past ten days had left little room for smiling, but I had to kind of laugh when I saw the kids in the yard across from the B&B playing in the nearly two feet of snow, wearing only short-sleeved T-shirts and ripped jeans. By most people's standards, it was freezing outside but most people didn't include kids who grew up with Vermont winters. As melodramatic as it sounded, I had little to look forward to growing up in this town. But at least I had Decembers in Vermont. Even as a angsty, moderately surly teenager, I had known that there had to be few other places in the world that were better to spend the holidays than here.

Pulling the blue armchair to the window, I settled down in it with my coffee, making sure my old Nokia flip phone was well within reach. It was a quarter to nine, so I'd be making my daily call soon but till then, I had time to get a bit nostalgic about the last Christmas I had spent in Vermont.

It was with Mrs. Nolan.

I was days from being eighteen and since I was saving up to move out, I'd resigned to spending my entire winter break locked indoors and maybe watching conspiracy documentaries with Aunt Joy, even though she preferred to sit alone. Of course, upon hearing my plan, Mrs. Nolan stepped in, inviting me to join her and her family on a Christmas Day trip to Montpelier, the capital city of Vermont. My memory wasn't exceptionally clear considering the amount of fun I had, but I did remember thinking the Vermont State House reminded me of a small, gold-topped White House, and that the amount of glittering lights wrapped about the poles and trees was good practice for all the lights I'd see in New York.

It was crazy to think that that was seven years ago, and this was the first time I'd been back since moving to New York. It was only a four hour drive and I used to try to appeal to Aaron by saying he could go snowboarding, but he always said that if he was going to ride, he might as well book a trip to Colorado or somewhere further west.

So no returns to Vermont were ever made.

At least not till now. It made me almost itch to make the hour drive to Montpelier. But then I remembered I had a call to make. As usual, it rang twice before being promptly picked up.

"Merry Christmas, Eeyore," Lori drawled on the other end.

"Merry Christmas," I smirked, sipping my coffee. "Yesterday was Holden Caulfield. Today is Eeyore. What cruel nickname are you going to have for me tomorrow?"

"Whichever angsty, depressed character from literature I can think of. On that topic, how are you feeling, pal? It's Christmas and you're alone."

"I was fine until you phrased it that way." I rested my woolly socked feet on the windowsill. "And I would've been alone anyway. Even if I didn't decide to participate in… whatever that whole wedding ordeal was."

"Oh, is that what we're calling your fauxmance now?"

"We're calling it whatever makes me least nauseous to say out loud. It varies by the day," I said, trying but failing to figure out how to put my crappy, old phone on speaker. "By the way, how do you put this thing you gave me on speaker?"

"You don't. It's old and it doesn't have that function. You win some and you lose some when you're trying to avoid all your friends back home."

"Fine. I can live without speaker," I said, tense over the fact that she had to bring up my "friends" at home. Usually, that was a segue for a report on Mason and it was no different this morning.

"He called again," Lori said, breaking away from the phone to yell something at her kid. When her voice came back, it was with a sigh. "Don't be mad at him for putting the deal on hold. *I'm* not, and you know I'd be the first to be pissed about it," she pointed out, referring to the multi-million dollar contract Mason had promised Vandermark Restaurants. He was supposed to bring my company in as the new group running his hotel's rooftop lounge. But when a full week passed after St. Lucia without me returning his calls – and without me returning to work – he backed out of the deal and renewed his contract with the existing group. I knew I had no right to be infuriated, but I was.

"You're too easily bought," I said to Lori.

"You know that's not true," she snorted. "The man did what he could to make up for it, Taylor. You can't deny that. And I can't deny that either because I'm home, it's Christmas and all I can do is stare at the REO

for the company party he booked with us. I mean it's no multi-million dollar contract but it's still going to make our year. The budget is just fucking obscene. I think it gets me wetter than my husband does."

"Lori! Jesus, isn't he home?"

"Yes, but I told him about how much money Mason dropped on a single party with us and even he jizzed his pants. And the fact that we got to charge him a ten grand fee for last minute booking? My God. Just the cherry on the top of my quarterly report sundae."

I laughed at her but curled my lip over Mason. "Well, I'm glad he gets to throw himself a giant Christmas-slash-New Years party and drown his nonexistent sorrows in hundreds of beautiful women."

"Stop. The sorrows aren't non-existent – there are totally sorrows. Tons of them. He called as much as he did to ask for you, didn't he? It got to the point where I *wasn't* looking forward to hearing from him," Lori said. "And to be fair, it's a corporate party. He's going to be boogying with a bunch of old farts in suits from The Leo Group."

"And hot receptionists who were kind of mean to me."

"She wasn't mean to you, and you're wallowing," Lori warned. "Don't wallow. It makes you bitter and I don't want you to come back to me all shitty and useless."

"Thanks," I snorted, making out the sounds of Lori moving around in her kitchen. "Oh God, I can hear you mixing pancake batter. Should I go let you be with your family on Christmas morning like a normal person?"

"Yes, but before you do, let me tell you that I credit this giant party booking from The Leo Group to you, so you can stop calling my ass every day and making sure I'm not going to fire you. I'm not going to fire you, so just stay out there for a bit longer. We're fine." She paused. "It's for business, anyway. Right?"

"Totally," I laughed, remembering the excuse she'd used to let me hide out in Vermont for awhile – something about scouting farmhouses to purchase and renovate for future events. It was totally bogus but she didn't really have a higher-up to report to, so it worked just fine.

"Anyway, the kid's going crazy on me so I gotta go. But you go… find some way to have a decent Christmas alone," Lori said. "And don't cut your ear off or anything."

"I don't get it."

"Van Gogh. He was depressed and he cut his ear off."

“Ah.” I squinted. “I think I prefer being called Eeyore.”

“Noted. Merry Christmas, T. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Upon hanging up, I did my whole routine of dryly laughing and thinking about how grateful I was to have such a kind but smartass boss in my life. But today, probably thanks to what little Christmas spirit I had, I went beyond that and considered how I wouldn’t have even had her in my life without Mrs. Nolan – the woman who guided my way during my years in Vermont before basically handing me off to Lori the moment I moved to New York. She had ensured I was constantly in capable hands, and I had repaid her by losing contact a few years ago, when I went through the break and then the miscarriage with Aaron. I hadn’t felt up to telling her about everything, and then once enough time passed that I did, I still refrained, ashamed by the sheer amount of her emails I had ignored.

So today, I would fix that.

Rushing to the nightstand, I grabbed the notepad and pen the room provided and brought it to the desk, sitting to write a letter to the woman I had named my son after. I included the parts about him, and about the St. Lucia wedding Aaron called off. And from there, I worked backwards because there was just so much she didn’t know that I desperately wanted her to.

When I finally finished, I had to take a full five minutes to massage the massive cramp from my hand. But it was worth it. I didn’t have Mrs. Nolan’s home address, but I obviously knew where she worked and while she wouldn’t be there today, I still remembered exactly which desk in which classroom was hers.

So throwing on my coat, my scarf and my boots, I headed out.

* * *

I probably should’ve figured the doors at my old high school would be locked, but I had a vague memory of once being inside the building on Christmas Day. But then I realized I had been with Mrs. Nolan, and she’d had a key.

“Great,” I breathed out after trying the last door to no avail. With snow falling harder now, I slipped the folded letter into my pocket. I still had every intention of getting it to her – I just had to figure out how.

Leaning against the door, I rolled my head back and heaved a sigh, staring up at the feathery snowfall. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to figure out my next move. When I opened them again, they flitted in surprise.

"Hi," said an equally flustered man in a scarf and knit hat. He was young and handsome and we stared at each other for a moment as I tried to figure out if he was an old classmate. We had to be about the same age. But then I glanced down and saw the slightly ragged, leather briefcase in his hand, a set of keys in the other.

"Oh. Are you a teacher here?" I asked eagerly, watching his startled green eyes dart about my face as if trying to place me as well. It was silent for a bit.

"Yes." He finally gave his curt answer. Then he stammered a bit and ran his hand through his hair, clearly forgetting he was wearing a cap. Pushing it off, he revealed tousled, almost black waves that got quickly flecked with snowflakes. "Sorry. You just don't look young enough to be one of my students, but you don't look old enough to be one of their parents."

"Oh. Yeah." My laugh was staccato. "I'm actually a former student here. Seven years ago. I, um…" I pulled out my letter and waved it in front of him. "I have something I want to give to Mrs. Nolan. Need to, actually. Very badly."

His eyebrows ascended. "Oh." There was a bit of a silence. Then he cracked what was almost a smile. "Late assignment?"

"I guess you can say that."

He nodded and moved past me to the door. "You can follow me. I'm headed in the same direction."

It was a fairly mundane scene but I watched with increasing excitement as his gloved fingers went through a ring of a dozen keys before finding the one that opened the side door. "Yes!" I breathed out when it turned in the lock to finally let us in the building. Mr. Teacher gave an awkward but vaguely amused smile and peered at me, walking stiffly at my side as we made our way down the very familiar hall. I had initially pegged him for the quintessential hot, young teacher that existed in every school, but now I felt like he was a bit too quiet for that title. "Sorry, by the way. If that was weird," I said, eyeing him back as I brushed my hands along the wall of lockers.

“No problem. Just not used to seeing anyone too excited to be here.”

“Oh, I wasn’t back in the day either, but I just… have a purpose now,” I said, unfolding my letter. He looked at it and mouthed *wow.*

“That looks like a… pretty lengthy essay.”

I looked sheepishly down at the damned near packet I was holding. “Oh,” I blushed. “Yeah. I wrote her a letter and I guess I got a little carried away. There was just a lot I had to update her on. It’s been a shameful while since we talked.”

“How long?”

“Two years. Because I’m an asshole,” I said, going instinctively stiff for a second till he laughed.

“I’m not your teacher. You can say asshole.” He sifted again through his keys as we stood outside Mrs. Nolan’s old classroom. It looked the same yet completely different. I cocked my head at him.

“How do you have the keys to her classroom?” I asked.

He gave that almost smile again. “It’s my classroom, too,” he said, opening the door and letting me into the room that still smelled heavily of whiteboard marker. I stopped for a moment, a cringing smile twitching my lips as I took in my painfully familiar surroundings. Mr. Teacher set his bag on his desk and peered at the nerves on my face. “You look like someone who’s still bad at math.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. I hear the fear of it never goes away,” he said somewhat humorously as he opened a drawer, taking out a folder and slipping it into his briefcase. He watched me watch him then explained. “Told myself I wouldn’t grade their exams over my break. But then the guilt set in.”

I laughed. “Grading on Christmas though?”

“It’s only a little weirder than whatever it is you’re doing,” he said. My eyes widened but he was in no rush to apologize. Zipping his briefcase, he finally said, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It is weird,” I conceded as I stood there for a second, staring down at my letter and for the first time all day, wondering what everyone was doing back home. Mason in particular.

“She your long lost mother or something?”

My eyes fluttered up to find Mr. Teacher sitting at the edge of his desk. “Mrs. Nolan? No. She was my favorite teacher. Well, actually, not

necessarily. She graded without a curve and she gave pop quizzes like she enjoyed watching us freeze over in terror."

There was finally a flicker of interest in his eye. "So why her?"

"She was the best person. Ever. She helped me plan my future to leave this town and move to New York."

"Which you did, where you're now successful," he finished. When I cocked my head, he let his gaze dip for the first time to my body. "Judging from the way you're dressed. Figured you'd done well for yourself."

"Right." I felt my hands getting clammy as they gripped the letter. "I guess… I have. Especially compared to my what my expectations were for myself in high school. She's actually always been the one to remind me that," I admitted, nodding toward her desk. "Mrs. Nolan. Whenever I felt down about anything, she'd remind me to put myself back in my high school shoes and imagine what I'd think or say if I knew that I'd end up growing up to work and live where I did, and know the people I did. And that would make me realize I didn't have anything to be upset about – at least until my problems got bigger, but you know." Crap, I was rambling and this guy really didn't seem like the type to be interested in anything about me, let alone my life story. But to my surprise, I looked up to see his expression thawing. His scarf was off now and he looked completely different to me. There was a scruff on his sharp jaw line that I hadn't expected. Even less expected was the slightly entertained look on his face. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Please tell me," I said with a nervous smile.

"Then please don't take this the wrong way. I just…" he trailed off, rubbing the scruff. "I guess what you said just now kind of went with the narrative that I made up for you in my head."

"You made up a narrative about me? In the two minutes since you've met me?"

"Naturally. You were an unexpected sight when I got here and you aren't dressed like someone who lives around town. And the whole being alone at your old high school on Christmas thing. Definitely adds to the story."

"Fair enough. So, what is it?" I asked. "The story you made up for me."

He set his briefcase down. “I’m not an English teacher so nothing elaborate. Just that you might be someone in the midst of a…” He trailed off to wince in a way that I appreciated. It meant that he felt at least a little bad for what he was about to say and a second ago, he didn’t seem too concerned with hurting my feelings. “Again, don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like someone who’s attempting an escape to her roots because she’s amid some melodramatic crisis in the nice, shiny life she has now. Is that… what this is?”

Wow.

I stared at him. But when he glanced up to get my reaction, he didn’t back down. Our eyes locked for a hard, intense moment then at once, we burst out laughing.

“Oh my God,” I groaned up to the ceiling. “That’s so embarrassing.”

“Why? Because I’m right?”

“Yes, you’re right. And I’m… transparent, I guess.”

“No, you’re not. I mean you are, but at least you’re a good story. You’ve been polite, you’re likable and you have a fair enough reason for writing that textbook of a letter to your old teacher. You’re making my routine trip to the building a lot more interesting on this lonely Christmas, so thanks for that.”

I snorted. “My pleasure, I guess.” As my laugh wound down, I turned and found my second-row desk from seven years ago. Running my hand over its surface, I sat on top of it.

“Settling in,” he observed. “I guess that means you aren’t rushing home to anyone.”

“No. I assume you aren’t either.”

“Your assumption would be correct.”

I hoisted myself further onto the desk and crossed my ankles. “Right. So tell me why *you’re* flying solo today?”

“Remarriage. No dad to speak of and mom’s recently married an asshole. Christmas was fun with just her but now it’s her and the trashy stepfamily.”

“Ooh. Trashy stepfamily. That sounds like the kind of reality show I watch.”

“Well, if you come home with me for Christmas, you can watch it up close in person.”

“I’d take you up on that but it would require you going home too,” I smirked. “And considering I just saw the soul sucked out of your eyes as you talked about them, I won’t force you to do that for my entertainment.”

“Thank God,” he said, massaging the tension from his own shoulder. “Soul-sucking would be an accurate description for them.”

“Alright. Girlfriend then?” I asked, shameless in my curiosity. It helped to be far from home with no familiar faces nearby. And Mr. Teacher didn’t so much as flinch at my question.

“No relationship as of September. Yourself?”

None as of ten days ago, I wanted to say. But then I reconsidered what Mason and I had been and corrected myself. “None as of October. My fiancé left me.”

“Brutal,” Teacher said. He meant it but he wasn’t shocked or dramatic about it, which I appreciated. “Is that why you’re here and not at home?”

“Surprisingly, no. Not really. Just escaping New York in general.”

“I thought New York was your escape from this place.”

My eyes dropped to the floor. “It was. Till about ten days ago.”

“What happened ten days ago?” he asked, moving to a desk in the first row, closer to mine. Sitting on top of it, he hugged his legs to his chest. I had to smile at how boyish the man looked in a classroom he usually taught in. “Something bad happened ten days ago.”

“No,” I replied. “Not ten days ago. Years ago. I just didn’t realize it at the time.”

“Bit of a riddle.”

I gave a weak laugh. “Sorry. I’d explain but there’s about ten hours of context that I’m not going to subject anyone to. Especially not on Christmas Day.”

“It’s alright. I’m a math teacher so I’m curious to figure it out based on the information you gave me.”

“Oh God, word problems? The worst.”

“I know. My favorite though,” he laughed, his green eyes squinting as he genuinely tried to solve my problem. We both laughed when he finally gave up. “Yeah, I’ll take the F on that one. I can’t figure it out but I’m guessing someone lied to you.”

“Bingo,” I smirked, our eyes finally locking in a gaze that wasn’t completely awkward. “A-plus.”

“Sorry I’m right.”

“That’s fine. I just… God, I’ve just been lied to way too many times and I just can’t take another one,” I murmured. “I swear the next time someone lies to me I’m gonna snap,” I joked, feigning a gasp when Mr. Teacher dropped his eyes. “Oh no. Did you lie to me too?” I teased. But my smile quivered when he let his legs down and drew his hand over his face.

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” My instinct was to laugh because I couldn’t imagine how he could’ve lied in just the past five minutes. But as the silence stretched longer by the second, I found myself frowning hard. “I don’t even know your name. What could you have lied about?”

“I, uh…” The hollows of his cheeks flexed as he tightened his jaw. “I guess it was by omission. My lie. I should’ve told you from the start that she wasn’t here anymore but I didn’t.”

I blinked and stared. “Who? Mrs. Nolan? She doesn’t work here anymore?”

His eyes flirted with looking elsewhere before he told me but then he brought himself to meet my gaze as he broke the news. “She passed last year. Her car skidded on ice.”

My heart sunk like a weight as my mouth fell wide open. My glassy eyes stared down at the four-paged letter in my hand. “Oh my God,” I whispered, my chest twisting in shock.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have led you on.”

“Why did you?” There was no anger in my voice but I had to ask.

“It was just instinct. I could tell you really wanted to see her and you had that long-ass letter written, so I figured you’d just be… happier not knowing the truth.” He shrugged. “I guess I wasn’t thinking about the possibility of you trying to find her home address or coming back another time to look for her. Figured I’d let you go home in peace.”

I sucked my bottom lip in, repeating his words in my head. *I wanted you to go home in peace*. I blinked away my tears for Mrs. Nolan as I looked up from my letter to him. “It wasn’t really your place to make that decision,” I said. But the moment the words left my lips I felt as if they sounded harsh.

“I recognize that now,” he admitted, eyes downcast. “It was just… human instinct, I guess.” He raked his hands through his hair. “When you like someone, you don’t want to see them hurt. Simple as that.”

“You don’t like me or know me.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I like you enough. You seemed like a nice person from the first few seconds that you spoke to me and I didn’t have the heart to break yours. Same way I don’t have the heart to tell my mom that she doesn’t actually have the secret to cooking turkey that isn’t dry. Her turkey’s fucking awful but I’ll never let her know it. I just don’t want to be the one to ruin her happy and perfectly harmless perception of herself. No one wants to be that prick.” He paused and gave thought. “Except maybe my step-dad.” When he cracked a real smile, I managed to almost do the same.

“Fair enough,” I finally said. And to my own surprise, I meant it.

Watching me get up off the desk, his shoulders fell a bit. “Leaving now because you’re mad at me?”

“I don’t know you well enough to be mad at you. But I get why you did what you did. You were protecting me from the truth. Human instinct,” I repeated his words. “And I guess I can say I appreciate it,” I added, tucking my letter back into my coat.

“I’m glad. If you want, I can make it up to you by bringing you home to meet my disaster of a stepfamily. They’re probably hammered by now. They’ll be better than anything you watch on Bravo.”

I laughed a bit. “No, better not. For your sake and mine. But I hope you have fun grading papers tonight.”

“They’re word problems, so you know I will.” Watching me head toward the door, he was silent. But once my hand touched the knob, he blurted, “Can I know your name?”

I stopped and turned around. “Taylor. Simms. Yours?”

“Ben Locklear.”

I took a last look at his face and put his name to it. “Mr. Locklear. Thanks for letting me learn something from you today,” I said. “Or at least giving me something to think about.” He nodded. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he didn’t want to see me go, but he didn’t know me well enough to say that. And I was glad because I needed to get back to the B&B to call Lori and perhaps pack my bags to go home. “Merry Christmas, Ben. It was really nice meeting you.”

“You too, Taylor. Merry Christmas,” he said. Once I was in the hallway, he called after me. “I hope you have a happy New Year, too!”

I called back. “Me too!”

And that was certainly no lie.

Chapter Twenty-Three

My return to the real world came three days later and while I'd started my day jittery about being in New York, the nerves subsided by the end of the work day – precisely when Lori swung by my desk and set before me a vanilla cupcake with pearl sprinkles lining the pink, petal-shaped frosting. I stared at it for an awed second before looking up at the very wry look on her face.

"Thought I'd forget, you little shit?" she asked.

"Hoped. But I pretty much knew better."

"You should. Anyway, happy birthday. I'm sorry you chose this day to come back, and I'm sorry I made you actually work."

"Trust me, I came back on this day for a reason," I said, plucking the cupcake into my hand and swiping a bit of frosting off with my finger. "It got my head back to feeling normal. Normal-ish, at least. All I need is another few work days and a few social outings and I'll start forgetting about… everything."

"Well, if you want to get a head start on the social outings, I'm going to drinks right now with the hippie-dippy chick we get our floral arrangements from. Not for pleasure. Just trying to get her to lower our costs. Can't wait for her to preach veganism to me for three hours," Lori said, staring at the wall. Unenthused, she turned to me. "Wanna join?"

"As much as you sold it, no. Not really."

She laughed. "Fine. Works better for me because I actually need you to drop this envelope off at the Atrium on the East side."

I stared at the manila envelope she handed me. "Are you kidding me?"

"I'm not. I know it's Mason Leo's holiday party but it's six in the evening, the party doesn't start till eight, and his staff is probably just leaving the office to get ready for tonight. So I promise he's not there. In fact, I personally called and made sure of it, so I swear on my husband's life that – "

"Okay, that's not necessary." I took the envelope from her hands. "I'll go."

"Atta girl. Assuming catering's done setting up, you can swipe some shrimp cocktail while you're at it," Lori said. Walking backwards, I took a

giant bite out of the cupcake and jabbed my finger at the remaining half.

"Got everything I need here," I said, my mouth purposely full.

And before she could respond, I stepped into the elevator because the last thing I needed was for her to ask about the crack in my voice. I was trying to be funny but my joke backfired on myself because saying those words aloud actually felt like unintentional self-torture. I didn't have everything I needed – I was so far from that it hurt. But like the other bruise in my soul, I told myself this pain would eventually lessen. For the sake of moving on, it was all I could hope for.

* * *

As Vandermark's biggest and most coveted party venue, the Atrium was generally booked year round with elegant socialite weddings. But come December, it became Manhattan's most popular destination for the kind of extravagant corporate holiday parties that had everyone gossiping for months – about things like who had too much fun with the top shelf open bar or who nearly had sex in front of all their colleagues in the middle of the dance floor.

Ascending the limestone steps at the entrance, I imagined that Mason's party for The Leo Group tonight would be exactly that, but with a hundred times as much scandal. I knew Mason had hurt at least a little over me and considering how many women had hurt him in the past – somewhere around zero – I had little doubt he'd use our clash on the tarmac as an excuse to indulge in vices and make himself feel better. And for Mason, feeling better at a lavish holiday party probably involved sleeping with all the prettiest girls in attendance and breaking his record for number of women in one night.

Masochist, I scolded myself, managing a smile at the man who opened the door into the Atrium. I just couldn't stop. In the past week, I had done alright trying to think about other things but now, in the same building that Mason would be in two hours, I couldn't stop picturing him. I saw him entering in the same suit he wore to work – something sleek, fitted and dark grey with a black tie. I saw him walking in joined by Noah, both of them striding first to the bar. Then with a drink cradled in those long fingers, Mason would lean back, fully relaxed as his blue eyes scanned the crowd for long legs in short skirts.

From there, my mind fast-forwarded to the image of buttons flying as the lucky girl he picked yanked his shirt open and squealed at the sight of that ripped torso. Another flash and I saw Mason stretched out asleep on the bed I'd gotten my best nights of slumber on.

Ugh.

I missed him. I'd faced enough deceit lately, so I really didn't need to lie to myself. I missed Mason in a way that I had never missed Aaron and on my birthday, the heartache was only that much worse.

"Miss Simms?"

Blinking, I looked up at a suited gentleman at the host stand, grateful for his sudden greeting because I sorely needed the distraction. "Yes, hi. I'm here to drop off some paperwork from Lori Kirk at Vandermark Restaurants. Would it be okay if I left it here?"

His accommodating smile wavered. "Ah. I can't accept deliveries on behalf of the host but I would suggest you walk into the main event room and leave the envelope there."

"Oh. Sure." I paused. "There's no one in there right now, is there?"

"No, Miss Simms, there is not."

"Perfect. Thank you very much," I said as I made my toward the grand double doors that led into the massive event room. Considering the party was in two hours, I expected to see dozens of tables with ornate centerpieces and hundreds of white and gold balloons floated to the top of the seventy-foot domed ceiling. I figured there had to be at least a dozen staffers milling around busily, trying to put the finishing touches on the party.

But when I walked into the empty room, what I saw snatched the breath from my throat.

Because there were no tables. There was no deejay booth or long buffet meant to cater to hundreds of guests. Missing were the loads of glittery decorations and noisemakers I expected for a giant holiday bash. Instead, the décor was isolated to the very center of the sprawling room.

The sheer amount of white hydrangeas was the first thing I saw. There were hundreds of them arranged throughout the space. They were breathtakingly beautiful but what my eyes settled on next, despite looking deeply mismatched in the elegant room, was what truly took my breath away.

It was a tall, leafy green tree. I surprised myself because I burst out laughing right away and just as quickly, my feet rushed to the display, giving me the proximity to confirm the sight of an eight-foot butterfly palm potted in a beautifully ornate vase. Tied around the stronger branches were strings on which pieces of Mozart truffles hung.

"How the hell…?"

In my account of the magical place I wanted to transport to for my birthday, I had never revealed my favorite kind of chocolate and yet here they were, pretending to grow from the imaginary, chocolate-sprouting palm tree I'd said I wanted to simply read under for my birthday.

"Oh my God, Mase," I murmured in disbelief as I ran my hands along the back of the plush, leather sectional sitting just under the plant. Next to it was a side table on which there was a single crystal wine glass, a bottle of Cabernet and an extra box of Mozart chocolates. I wondered again how Mason knew about my favorite and somewhat obscure sweets, but then I saw the antique shelf holding a carefully curated selection of books – all the ones in my apartment that I had started but not finished, along with dozens of books from the same two authors that always came recommended to me by Sofia. It didn't take long at that point to figure out that she'd been called to consult for this elaborate evening constructed entirely for me.

I was so struck by the unbelievable sight in front of me that it took a good ten minutes for me to notice the white envelope sitting on top of the couch. Grabbing it off the pillow, I tore it eagerly open. Until this moment, my smile had been cautious, curling my mouth at a snail's pace. Upon skimming the six words typed inside the card, a huge grin burst like fireworks onto my lips.

"Open the envelope you brought here," I read aloud before dropping the card like a hot potato and grabbing the manila sleeve Lori had given me. Sliding the thick sheet of crisp white out of the envelope, my eyes settled upon Mason's handwriting.

I couldn't build you your own island to celebrate in peace and quiet so I did my best. This whole space is yours for the rest of the night. I figured one bottle of wine would be enough for you but in case you're no longer a lightweight, a selection will arrive for you to choose from when dinner and dessert are served.

Happy birthday, Taylor.

Love,

M

I breathed out hard, using my pinky knuckle to dot at the tears in the corners of my eyes. I wasn't sure how long I stood there holding the letter in my hand but on cue, the gentleman outside entered to wish me a happy birthday and show me just how to get his attention if I needed anything before dinner arrived.

From there, I sunk into the couch, delighted by the blanket provided for me to wrap myself in. It was soft and oversized and it made me want even more to call Mason and ask him to join me on my little island. But I stopped myself. Aside from the fact that my dinky little flip phone didn't have his number in the contacts, I told myself that I needed this time alone.

But that I could see him soon. Right after.

So pouring myself a glass of wine, I grabbed the book I'd been trying to finish for ages now and sunk cozily into the couch, flipping to where I'd left off and finally starting my new chapter.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Been waiting for you, Miss Taylor."

My eyes fluttered after giving my name to the doorman. I had stayed at the Atrium till closing and my visit to Mason's apartment wasn't entirely planned myself so with confusion, I tilted my head at him. "You have?"

"Mr. Leo gave me your name. Said if a Taylor Simms came by, let her up. No need to call and ask."

"Really," I laughed softly, my cheeks tingling. "It's nearly two in the morning. Are you positive you don't need to call him?" When he nodded, I smiled down at myself. "Well, that makes me feel nice."

"Likewise, miss. I hate seeing a good man so torn up."

I looked up with a grimace. "Has it been bad?" I asked quietly, feeling the answer in the long pause the man gave.

"You're here," he finally said, nodding toward the elevators. "That's all that matters."

I smiled, unwinding the scarf from my neck. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. Enjoy your night, Miss Simms. Please give my regards to Mr. Leo."

On that note, I made my way to the elevators, my pulse picking up as anticipation thrummed throughout me. It was mostly excitement – a pleasant buzz of heat that relaxed any tension in my body as I made my way up the building to Mason's penthouse. My heart was pounding by the time I reached his floor but I wasn't nervous. In fact, I felt oddly at home.

And when the elevator doors opened, I immediately found Mason, my eyes settling on the profile of his shirtless body sitting at the edge of his couch, sifting through what looked like papers for work. In just grey sweats, he was fucking stunning. He looked like the most beautiful man I would ever lay my eyes on. And the view only got better as he turned and let his gaze find me. It was surprised for all of a second but then he rose to his feet, turning that body to face me as a faint but joyous grin drifted onto his lips.

"Hi," I finally said, listening to the elevator door close behind me. Mason didn't answer, only watched as I came toward him, shedding my coat and my cardigan, slipping out of my ballet flats till I was in just a sweater and leggings as I stood before him, pushing him gently back down on his couch and climbing into his lap. I felt the weight of the world expel

from the sigh that escaped his lips, and under my palms, I felt the rumble in his chest as he leaned his forehead against mine. For a moment, we simply breathed together. But then he finally spoke and that voice I missed so badly flooded me with relief.

"I thought I knew what it was like to be happy to see you," he murmured, his breath coating my lips. "But I don't think I really knew till now." He opened his eyes to drink me in, pulling away but holding me tight, like I might somehow escape his arms again. But he seemed reassured by the needy curl of my fingertips against his chest. I wanted to hold onto him too. I hardly ever wanted to let go. "You know how sorry I am, right, Taylor?"

Holding his face in my hands, I nodded. "And I think I understand why you did what you did. I just need to ask you one question."

"Ask me."

I wet my lips. "The night you came to get me. I still remember the questions I asked you in the cab when I thought you were Aaron. I asked if you still loved me," I whispered, watching the storm twisting behind his dark eyes. "And you said yes. You said it so convincingly I think I'm just wondering how and why you did that."

"I really wished I was him in that moment," Mason answered with a soft laugh. "Sounds harsh but you know it would take a lot for me to ever wish I was Aaron. But I wished it hard that night. I wanted to be the person to save you whenever you needed. I wanted to be the man who took care of you and held you at night. But you were with him a year by that point. You loved him and it was too late for me to be the one for you, so I gave you what I thought what you wanted. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I understand now, Mason. I promise," I insisted softly, letting him press a kiss to my lips.

"I never wanted to hurt you. And every day from here on out, I'm going to make it up to you, Taylor. That's all I want to do."

My lips wiggled into a crooked smile. "Gotta say, you're off to a pretty good start."

"Glad to hear that. Happy birthday, by the way."

"It's two in the morning, so it's not my birthday anymore. But thank you," I said teasingly. "And thank you for bringing my little island to life. I know you thought my birthday wish was lame but it was easily the best birthday of my life today."

“Good.” Mason brought my face closer to his. Kissing me, he brought me with him as he laid on the couch. I exhaled as I rested my weight on his strong body, running my hands down his sculpted torso as his hot tongue swept against mine. “But they’re only going to get better from here.”

“Birthdays?” I giggled against his mouth, closing my eyes as his hands lifted my sweater up my body.

“Birthdays.” His lips devoured me. “New Years.” Another thrust of his tongue. “Valentines. Christmas.” He smiled back against my mouth between every sweet, passionate kiss. “I’m going to give you everything you ever wanted, Taylor. And all the things you didn’t know you wanted.”

Music to my damned ears.

“What about what I want right now?” I asked, reaching down between us and cupping what I could already feel was almost fully hard. Mason groaned.

“Fuck, I don’t think you know how bad I’ve wanted that the past two weeks.” He moved my hand up and down his impressive shaft, hard and thick against my fingers.

“Trust me, I was hurting for it pretty bad myself.”

“And did you satisfy that craving?”

I smirked. “Is this your way of asking if I’ve slept with anyone since we’ve been apart?”

“I’ll admit I’m curious.” Carrying me, he stood up, eyes locked on mine as he walked me across the living room and toward the staircase. “So tell me.”

“I haven’t been with anyone else, Mase.” My heart lifted with every step he brought me up toward his bedroom. “Your turn.”

“I haven’t been with anyone since we started,” he said, his eyes dipping to my curving lips. “I haven’t wanted to, and I can’t imagine that I’m going to.”

I grinned. “Good answer.”

“Just the truth,” he said as he pushed open the door to the bedroom I hadn’t realized how much I missed till I was in it again. Laid gently on the plush bed, I felt again like a queen. I breathed steady, my cheeks hot as I watched Mason slip his hand under my back and arch it for him to better pull off my sweater, then my leggings. Kissing the straps of my bra off my shoulder, he pushed his sweats down till he could kick them off. He wasn’t

wearing boxers underneath, so I gave a little moan as I felt the weight of his hot erection fall between my legs.

"Spread your legs for me." His command was firm and I could hear in it just how much he missed me, how much he wanted me. In his arms again, it felt so incredibly good. I was already filled with gratification before he entered me, but then with a weighty stroke of his tip against the length of my sex, he confirmed my wetness with a groan and then slid easily inside me.

"Mason," I gasped, his stroke a gliding force that stretched and rocked me from the first second. We wasted no time with teasing. Our need for one another was already maxed out. I was wetter than I could stand and he was harder than I knew possible. Already lost, I thrust my hips up to meet him, to match the mounting intensity of his every push inside me. My abs burned as I clenched up toward him but as Mason pounded in and out of me, I fucked him right back, driven by the deep groans that tore from his chest as our bodies returned to that place of just need, desire and everything we could do to fulfill it. But when I ran out of the strength to meet his, Mason relieved me. Grabbing two handfuls of my ass, he pulled my hips higher and drove deeper inside me, so instantly commanding that I could hardly make a sound.

The kiss he crushed over my lips was frantic now, and in it, I tasted those words he wouldn't say on our last day in St. Lucia. I didn't care if now wasn't the time. I needed to let them out. Tearing away from his mouth, I looked into Mason's eyes and breathed urgently, "I love you." He was the second man I'd ever said the words to. The first I'd truly meant them with.

"I love you," Mason returned, his cock rubbing a sweet spot inside me, his smoldering gaze completely consuming mine. "I have loved you," he breathed. "I can't stop, Taylor. Even when I tried, I couldn't. I can't control it with you."

"You don't have to now. You can love me," I whispered. My body was slack now, languid as it received the years of Mason's need in the form of his every mighty blow inside me. "You have me."

"Tell me again," he grunted like I was fueling him.

"You have me." One hand clawing his back, the other fisted the sheets. "I'm yours, Mason," I panted. "Only yours."

As if possessed by my words, Mason growled and sank himself with a painful pleasure inside me, filling me completely then pulling out, leaving just his tip throbbing between my walls before plunging in again. He kept his eyes pinned to me as he repeated the torturous stroke, over and over till I erupted to orgasm beneath him, trembling under his weight. Mason cursed under his breath as his cock jerked inside me. Then with a deep, battered groan, he came, filling my delirious body with the satisfying heat of his pleasure.

Though we lay half-awake in each others arms for an hour, I eventually fell asleep on his chest, stirring only hours later when it was morning but still dark out. I could tell from the sound of his breath that Mason was asleep, but as if sensing me, he rumbled awake moments later. A strip of moonlight lit his face as he watched me set my alarm. Then he tipped my chin up and gazed at me. "Going back to sleep now?"

"Yes. Will you be here when I wake up in the morning?" Once upon a time, the question would have been out of fear that he'd decided our night together was a mistake. Now, it was solely because we were back in the real world, both of us due to be at work in barely four hours.

Wrapping his arms tighter around me, Mason blinked, the blue of his eyes gleaming out like stars behind those heavy lids. "I will. Will you?"

"Yes."

Through his sleepiness, he gave me a crooked smile. "Will you be here the morning after?"

"I can be."

"After that?"

I grinned up at him in the quiet of the night. "If you want me to be."

"I want you to be," he murmured huskily, the sound of his groggy voice striking that odd sense of home inside me again. Melting into his hard body, I breathed out with content so good it felt almost unfair.

"Then I'll be here," I whispered, closing my eyes as he kissed the top of my head and drifted slowly back asleep.

* * *

In the morning, when I awoke, Mason still lay stretched out beneath me. One arm stretched over his head, the other held me on top of him, so protective in its grasp that I couldn't stir without waking him. With a stretch

and a rumble, Mason smiled but to my charmed delight, his eyes remained closed and he continued sleeping for just a little longer. It gave me the time to study him. *Imagine waking up to this every morning,* I smirked to myself. Once upon a time, I'd woken in this bedroom and thought those words with a rueful envy of whichever girl would someday get to do that.

That day wasn't even long ago. But I couldn't count exactly how many passed since. With some people, apparently, life just happened faster. But I imagined it did for a reason – to make up for the missteps, all the wrong choices when faced with a fork in the road. I had obviously chosen incorrectly at least once before. But with Mason, I'd redirected my life. It was a long road over a short time, but I'd finally found myself in what was undeniably the right place.

And I couldn't deny that as Mason awoke to simply gaze at me with those eyes I could stare into forever.

I worked for this prize. I climbed a hundred mountains and fell ninety-nine times. It was rough but now that I was here with a man I loved with every ounce of me, I had a new mantra.

No regrets.

Not even one.

Epilogue

One Year Later

I was running late for work but I decided last minute that I'd be a little boastful today and wear the diamond necklace Mason had given me back when we were still… whatever we were. More than twelve months into our true relationship and it was literally still a daily effort to refrain from shouting, "Good *God*, I have the sexiest boyfriend on Earth!" The compulsion came randomly – while browsing groceries with Mason, strolling hand-in-hand on the sidewalk with him or simply sitting next to him in front of our TV. That this man was mine, and that we loved each other the way that we did – the fact had yet to become remotely boring to me. There were some delightfully mundane parts of our days together now, like brushing our teeth side by side in the morning and trying to pick out a movie at night, but still, I was amazed by us. Grateful for us. For *him*.

So I told myself I deserved to slightly brag today and wear my diamond necklace to just a regular day at work.

Mason lifted his eyebrows when he saw me come downstairs into the kitchen. He was fully dressed for work and sporting a sexy stubble that gave me instant grabby hands.

"Damn it, I love it," I groaned as I ran my fingertips along his beautiful jaw line. Mason watched with a grin as I then dropped my hands to straighten his tie. It never actually needed straightening. I just liked touching it every morning.

"If you love it then why the 'damn it'?"

"Because I'm running late and I can't pounce on you right now."

"Like running late has ever stopped you in the past ten months of living together."

I sighed. "I know, but I need to stop taking advantage of Lori's kindness. And she always just *knows* when I go to work freshly…"

"Fucked?" Mason filled in wickedly, that gorgeous smirk on his lips. I wet mine.

"Yes."

"Fine, I'll keep my hands off of you till you get home," Mason groaned, falling away from me to return to the cup of coffee he'd been

drinking. “I had a surprise for you though. Guess it’ll have to wait.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Nuh-uh, we’re not playing this game. What was the surprise? You need to tell me before I go to work.”

“Do I? Why’s that?”

“Because it’s Wednesday and I can always use a little boost on Wednesdays.”

Mason laughed as he set his cup in the sink. “Jesus, Taylor. You know that’s just a self-fulfilling prophecy now.”

I knew. But I liked to continue my joking hatred of Wednesdays by constantly pointing out when not-so-great things happened on Wednesdays. It wasn’t like it actually bothered me anymore, nor did it make me remotely sad or angry about my past engagement to Aaron. It was just my humorous way of acknowledging the other Leo brother because we were both so thoroughly past him and the presence he once had on our lives.

As predicted, Aaron pulled away from his family, as he had already begun to do during his engagement to Eva Tully. According to Mason’s mother, Aaron was still “finding himself” amid his travels to Southeast Asia. After the almost-wedding to Eva last year, he wound up leaving his second life behind, packing a few things from the Tully estate in Silicon Valley and booking a one-way ticket to Thailand. He still lived there and while either Mason nor I kept in contact with him, we were in fact relieved to hear he was doing well, and even happier to know that he was calling Clara somewhat regularly – for his standards at least. They were mending their relationship from afar, in the non-confrontational way that Aaron clearly required when it came to approaching his problems.

“I miss hugging him,” Clara confessed when Mason and I visited her for her birthday in the summer. “But any physical presence I’ve lost from my son, I’ve at least gained in a daughter,” she said, holding my face and planting a giant kiss on my forehead. It was a sweet moment that she only lightly ruined by adding, “And hopefully soon…”

“Clara!” I warned her, knowing she was about to say “grandchildren.” From where he sat, Mason laughed, asking his mother to ease off of me.

“Let me marry her first,” he said.

“Then… do it, no?” Clara made a face as if it were the simplest solution. “My other son was too stupid to make her Mrs. Leo, but I expect my older one to be smarter.”

I laughed at the way she phrased it. I quite enjoyed it actually, because I no longer looked back on my three years with Aaron with regret. Not a single day of it. Our complicated journey created the path on which I found Mason. It was a jagged, broken one with more twists and turns than I could've ever imagined, but that only attested to our strength – to the universe's persistence for us to find one another. For that reason, I didn't worry about when our engagement would come. I just knew that eventually, it would. And like our whirlwind romance, it would be that much better because we waited. Because we stretched ourselves to the breaking point before giving ourselves the reward.

Officially together for a year now, I suspected I could wait several more before I was at my limit. It would hurt, but I could bear it considering the daily victory that came in coming home at nights to Mason.

"Fine, I take it back," I huffed, throwing myself toward the kitchen counter at Mason and laughing when he pretended to reject me.

"No. I can't give you the surprise without touching you."

"Then touch me."

He flashed that dirty, sexy smile. "Anywhere?"

I narrowed my eyes as he stared at the diamond between my breasts. "Yes, Mason. Anywhere."

Studying me in silence for a moment, Mason finally reached for my waist and pulled me in with both hands, turning me around to hoist me swiftly onto the kitchen counter. Our eyes level, he gazed a bit more seriously at me now. Having lived together for so long, I was better than ever at reading the man, so my heart pitter-pattered before he even slid the velvet box from his pocket. Of course when I saw it, my heart full on thumped like a rock under my ribs, throwing itself against my chest with a dizzying excitement.

"Don't do this to me," I whispered desperately. "I swear to God if there are Wednesday panties in there, Mason…" The first tear fell as he shook his head, a gentle laugh breathing from his perfect lips as he held the box before me and lifted the top to make my heart explode. "Oh my God." There wasn't enough oxygen in the world to placate my lungs as I stared in instant worship. I didn't need its brilliance or its size to sweep me off my feet, but the diamond itself was in fact as glorious as the moment was and I had no idea how to stop crying. "Mase, oh my God…"

“Hey,” he teased with a sweet chuckle at my reaction. “You know what I’m going to ask so before you lose the ability to speak, I need you to give me an answer.”

“Asshole,” I giggled through tears, hardly surprised that our engagement would somehow include profanity. “Knowing it is one thing, Mase. Hearing it is another.”

“Yeah? You wanna hear it?”

“Yes, let me hear it.”

Laughing, Mason gripped me gently, sliding me off the counter so I could stand on my shaky feet as he dropped to one knee before me, looking up with more love in his eyes than I’d ever seen or felt in my life. “I had a fantasy about this the first second I looked at you, Taylor. Make it real for me now,” Mason murmured, starting toward the words I had been prepared to wait till the edge of forever for. A grin curving his mouth, they finally uttered from his lips. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” The answer burst out just as he finished popping the question, and as Mason took my hand through what I could’ve sworn were tears of his own, I did my best to breathe. But it was hard to as my heart settled on the name I had long fantasized about saying aloud someday: *Taylor Leo.*

Scratch that.

Mrs. *Mason* Leo.

Like my hand, it had the most beautiful damned ring to it.

The End

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IN TOO DEEP

Stella Rhys

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The week he was set to propose, I found out that Jackson was cheating.
With his friend's nineteen-year-old daughter.
I wasn't thinking – I forced my way into her apartment the night I saw their sex tape.
But now she's gone missing and Jackson has me trapped in our relationship.
To even the score, he's told me to have my own affair.

"It's complicated" doesn't even begin to describe Lara Pierce's engagement to Jackson Kinsley, the gorgeous man at the top of the rich, mysterious boys club that runs Manhattan society. Tangled in a world of luxe galas, shiny penthouses and handsome men who can literally get away with murder, Lara's sure that accepting Jackson's offer will somehow make her wild life a little simpler.

But when she unknowingly sleeps with Jackson's irresistibly tall, dark and sexy brother, Jake, the floodgates open – to the darkest truths and deepest lies that shatter her perfect world a million times over.

****IN TOO DEEP is book one of two in the In Too Deep series. ****

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Prologue

First and foremost, his parents love me. But on top of that, his colleagues love me. The wives and girlfriends love me. I "keep them young." At their galas, I dress like Jackie O but dance like J. Lo. I don't tell any of them that the dinners I host are inspired by the Pinterest board of some girl named Maggie in Wisconsin.

I keep all of his secrets. I dig for dirt when he asks for it. I cook, I massage, I dress like I live in the pages of Elle. Like he so desperately needs me to, I make all of his friends jealous. Because I, after years of his styling and molding, am the perfect little Stepford girlfriend. I am as much a part of his good image as he is.

And so he'll never let me go.

No matter how hard I scream and claw and kick and fight, he won't ever let me go. He cheated on me. After four years – and three living together in his Chelsea duplex – he cheated on me with his hedge fund colleague's nineteen-year-old daughter. He spent four months sleeping with her. He recorded video of their trysts, which carried on in a suite at the downtown W. In one of the shaky, breathy clips, she told him that she loved him. Hugging a white sheet to her chest, her blue eyes gazing into the camera, she blew a kiss with her pink lips and said, "Jackson Kinsley, I love you to pieces." Gabrielle Winter was her name.

No. Not was – *is*.

Gabrielle Winter *is* her name. After all, you can't really call a girl dead when her body has yet to be found.

Chapter One

It's been three weeks since the Gabrielle incident and I'm not yet ready to let Jackson touch me. I hate sleeping in the same bed as a man whose hands caressed another woman's breasts just five weeks ago. I hate feeling his lips graze my shoulder in the night because I know from the videos that those lips have trailed every last inch of her skin. I hate that I have to act like everything is utterly normal in front of his friends.

But worst of all, I hate that he thinks I killed her.

I hate that he has evidence that makes it look quite clear that I'm in fact a murderer. More than any of it, I hate that I gave Gabrielle a reason to leave him that panicked, breathless voicemail on the night of her disappearance.

"She's here, Jax! It's Lara – she was pounding on my door and she – *Jax!* Oh my God – *no!* Get out of my apartment, you crazy bitch! Jax! Help me, get here *now!*"

There are a hundred things I've done in my life that I've wished to take back but God, does that visit to Gabrielle's apartment take the cake. It was the kind of rash decision that I'd never made even once before in my twenty-six years. But several life-shattering discoveries had led up to the moment, the time line of which went some something like this:

On Sunday, I'd returned from my trip with Sloane to Easthampton. I'd slipped quietly into my apartment hoping to surprise Jackson but instead, I found him sitting on our leather sectional, watching a video of himself on our fifty-inch flat screen. A video of himself and a girl I recognized from the charity circuit. Lyle Winter's daughter, Gabrielle. Wasn't she just a freshman at NYU? Didn't she normally dress in wild prints and feather headbands? Why in God's name then was I watching her peel off a sophisticated set of black lingerie? More pressing than that, why was my boyfriend recording video as she did so?

Somehow, for several seconds, I toyed with denial. This is not what it looks like, I told himself. That isn't Gabrielle. Maybe that isn't Jackson either.

But then I saw a close-up of his promise ring – an identical match to the one I wore on my own right hand, that he bought for me two years ago,

when I said I wasn't ready to be engaged. I heard his voice. The one that said "goodnight" to me for the past four years straight. My stomach dropped and my body went cold. I stood motionless behind Jackson, who was jacking off to it all, too lost in his own pleasure to realize that I was standing right there in the same room. Too busy reliving some sordid night to notice me standing just two yards behind him, shattering into a million little pieces as the camera set on a tabletop to catch him groaning as he entered her.

It sounds insane but I stood there for another fifteen minutes or however long it was for me to get through the rest of their recorded romp. I was paralyzed. In disbelief.

Just the week prior, Jackson and I had been in Connecticut visiting his family. His mom had pouted at me for having no answer regarding when I wanted to have kids since she certainly couldn't rely on his jet-setting brother, Jacob, to ever settle down. Jackson laughed and said that whenever I thought of a time for kids, he'd clean out my gift-wrapping room and get to work on building a nursery. We bantered about why my "ribbon storage" should be converted instead of his "brandy room," where he brought the boys for cigars after dinner. He laughed and said that it would be cruel to subject our infant child to a room in which the walls had spent years absorbing smoke. I said, "Fine, you're right," and his mom took it as my tacit agreement to soon give her grandchildren.

During the car ride back to Manhattan, Jackson ran his hand through my hair. "You know I would never pressure you to have kids before you were ready, right?" he asked. "Same goes for the engagement. I know you're mine, I know you love me. I'm happy to wait for everything. They're worth the wait if they're with you. But only you."

"You'll survive your mom's nagging till then?" I teased.

"As long as you're taking it with me."

That night, while I showered, I overheard him on the phone with his mother. "I know you want her to have Grandma's ring but I want her to have her own. Lara's different, Mom. She's special. And we've been through too much. Whatever I get her will be the start of our own story. And we'll pass it down only if she wants to."

The speech had me. Coming out of the shower, I had stared at my promise ring and finally considered trading it in for one more permanent. It was the first time in our four years together that I felt finally ready. So for a

week, I wondered how I would break the news to Jackson. After all, telling him I was ready was as good as proposing to him myself. It was a big deal for me. So I decided to do what I always did when in need of advice: go on a weekend trip with my best friend. While in the Hamptons with Sloane, we brainstormed over cocktails, giggling like we were thirteen again.

"Remember in eighth grade when you broke up with Josh Twersky because he stole eight dollars from your wallet?" I asked. "And then you said we had to grow up to have millionaire boyfriends so this never happened again?

Sloane laughed so hard she may or may not have dribbled champagne onto the front of her Pucci dress. "Millionaire boyfriends who had to be best friends too," she reminded me with a snort. "We were such idiots."

"Well."

"We were prophetic idiots," Sloane corrected herself. And then we laughed, downed the rest of our drinks and decided to cut our trip short to return home to our boyfriends, Jackson Kinsley and Caleb Weiss, founders of Kinsley Weiss Capital Management, and the billionaire friends who proved our teen selves to have been less silly and unrealistic than everyone thought.

It had been too good. The perfect kind of girls' weekend that reminded me how truly blessed I was and how I couldn't possibly be luckier. On the ride back home, I decided that Sloane was right: the best way to tell Jackson was just to tell him – to just surprise him in our apartment, plant a kiss on his lips and tell him that I was finally ready to be his wife.

But of course, I went home that day and instead of realizing the happy moment I'd fantasized about for a weekend, I discovered that the charmed life I had loved so deeply, so fiercely had been nothing more than a sick and twisted lie.

Chapter Two

I fought a teenage girl.

I, a twenty-six-year-old woman with a thirty-three-year-old fiancé, scratched and clawed and screeched with a nineteen-year-old college student. What would the wives say if they saw me? I was their favorite new thing – the fascination of their social circle. I'd landed Jackson Kinsley, the tallest, sexiest, hardest-to-tame prize in the elite boys club their husbands and fiancés all ran in – a boys club that essentially ran the city. I could've been easy to hate but instead, they loved me for being wide-eyed but savvy – fascinated by their lives of luxury yet surprisingly adept at adjusting to society. I had the "natural grace and small-town charm" that Sofie Winter, silver-haired queen of the charity ball circuit, found just *adorable*.

Jackson told me never to lose that, as it was the only thing keeping the other wives from ripping my throat out. "Their husbands all jerk off to you every morning in the shower," he liked to tell me with smug pride. "But if Sofie loves you, they have to love you too."

So they did. But how Sofie would hate me if she knew what I'd done to her daughter.

After watching Gabrielle's breathy sex tapes with my fiancé, I had decided to confront her in person. I knew Lyle and Sofie had bought her an apartment in Gramercy Park last year. I didn't know exactly where it was but after a short search through Jackson's phone, I found the address shamelessly saved with the rest of her contact information. I texted it to myself. Then, as Jackson was toweling off, I left.

"*She's here, Jax! It's Lara – she's pounding on my door and she – Jax!*"

Gabrielle, in a white silk robe, was on the phone with Jackson by the time I pushed my way into her apartment. Wild, unhinged. On repeat were a million profanity-laced versions of "*how dare you*" as I charged at her like an angry bull. It was an idiot move but I was blinded by rage. This girl knew me. She linked arms with me when I came to her house for dinner, traipsing me into her bedroom to show me videos of her dance recitals. She and her friends pouted at me during the charity balls, pleading for me to join them since I was "too young" to sit at their parents' table. This was a girl who treated me like her favorite cousin – all the while filming herself in

the throes with my fiancé. That was quite possibly the definition of audacity.

Either that or the fact that she tried to break a wine glass on my face.

When I knocked her phone out of her hands that night, Gabrielle had shrieked "*bitch*," grabbed her empty glass of white and then swung it at my left eye. I don't remember exactly what happened next. I'm not sure if the dots in my vision were from sheer rage or impact with glass. It was at that point that I began to claw back. I swung and swiped, landing one solid punch before feeling Gabrielle tackle me to the ground.

We then rolled on the glass-covered floor, two idiots who had never fought once before in our privileged lives. It wasn't long before we were both crying, tired and defeated. Her blood on my shirt, my hair in her nails, we crawled onto our hands and knees, coughing and sobbing like fools.

"He said you guys were just for show," she defended herself between tearful hiccups. "I didn't think you actually loved him. He *said* you didn't."

What the fuck? "We couldn't have loved each other more." The words tore with hatred from my throat. But at that point, the hatred was for Jackson. I put an emphasis on the word "loved." It wasn't quite past tense for me yet considering our long history together, but I was well on my way down that path. Jackson had cheated on me with a foolish young girl he'd essentially tricked. My body still loved him out of instinct but soon enough, my mind would convince it to stop. I knew it.

So with that, I left the apartment that night – a scraped, tousled, bloody mess.

Back at the duplex, Jackson demanded to know what had happened. He was angry, ashamed and shocked all at once. Raking his fingers through his wet blonde hair, he followed me into the bedroom, where I immediately shed my clothes. His voice was normally low, velvety. Now, it was gravel. "Is that *your* blood?"

"Hers," I answered through my teeth.

"What the *fuck*, Lara? What happened? What did you do?" He pulled on my bare arm as I tried to ignore him for the bathroom, my crawling skin desperate for a shower. "Baby. *Babe*. Jesus Christ, talk to me. I know I fucked the hell up, I know I did. But you know she meant nothing – she was just a stupid, needy little girl who went after me. I had a moment of weakness. I'm sorry. But I love you more than anything in this fucking

world and I can explain it all to you if you just to talk to me first! We can't figure this out if you don't tell me what the hell happened between you and Gabby tonight!"

Jerking out of his grip, I headed for the shower. "We'll talk in the morning," I said definitively, an eerie calm to my voice. It was just that I knew it at that point. I was going to end it. Us. Jackson and Lara, the perfect couple that no one could get enough of. I just didn't have the energy to deal with his desperate pleading before I slept. I was exhausted. I needed rest to deal with a breakup that would no doubt be followed by Jackson at my feet, begging me not to go.

But that wasn't how it wound up happening. Just as I began my breakup speech the next day, we got a call. Gabrielle Winter was reported missing. Blood had been found in her apartment and from the way Jackson looked at me, it was clear that he had drawn a conclusion.

"What is it that you think I *did*, Jackson?" I asked, the words dripping from my lips with revulsion.

"I don't want to know, Lara," Jackson replied, his jaw tight, his words measured. "I don't ever want to talk about this again because all I know is you went to find her and now she's fucking gone."

"Jackson, do you hear what you're accusing me of?" I hissed, in shock that he'd even believe me capable of such a thing. We had been together four years. He knew every part of me. He knew that I'd cried for three hours after he killed a cute albeit horrifying mouse that tormented his old TriBeCa loft. I hated the thing but still sobbed like a child when I saw it finally defeated, its tiny body limp and lifeless after Jackson brought a broom down upon it. After cleaning up, he had cupped my cheeks and kissed me, telling me we should go see a movie then get dessert to distract me and sooth my nerves. That was the Jackson I knew. But in the last few days, I'd become acquainted with a different Jackson – one who slept with other women and accused me of killing them. "Jesus fucking *Christ*, Jackson, I had absolutely nothing to do with this!" I protested, fighting angry tears as he closed the gap between us.

"Well what do you think her blood on your shirt would look like to investigators, Lara?" he asked, his curled lips an inch from mine. "What do you think they would say about the voicemail Gabby left on my phone? When she was screaming that you were after her?"

The blood drained from my face once I realized what it all looked like. It was a perfect picture of what didn't actually happen. I *had* gone to find Gabrielle Winter and I had forced my way into the apartment. I'd screamed at her, called her every name under the sun. I remembered digging my nails into her skin and drawing blood.

Still, I hadn't killed her.

But Jackson looked at me as if I did.

"Now like I said." He kept his blue eyes fixed on me as he whipped his shirt up over his head. "I don't want to talk about this again, so get dressed while I shower. I have a lunch with the other investors at noon and they expect to see you there," he said, ignoring what I'd said about moving out that afternoon. Leaning into me, he touched my waist, trailing his hand up until he cupped the swell of my breast. "And make sure you pick out something nice and tight." His last demand came with a squeeze. "You know I like to give them something to look at."

Chapter Three

Laying on my side, I stared at the antique clock on the nightstand. It was 8AM and I'd been awake for an hour, but the second I heard Jackson begin stirring behind me, I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"Mmm, baby." He rumbled something deep and content, wrapping his sleepy arms around me and trying for the thirtieth day in a row to act like this could be just another one of our pre-Gabrielle mornings. Kissing the back of my neck, he rubbed his hard cock against my back, sliding his hand from my side to my stomach, then slowly up to my breasts. "Good morning," he murmured into my skin, kissing along my shoulders as his fingers tugged on the neckline of my cotton nightgown, pulling slowly down until my breasts popped out. "Mmm." I could practically hear his mischievous grin. "Sawyer could barely take his eyes off of you last night," he said, referring to his friend and one of the other investors of Monarch, a much-anticipated hotel in Chelsea. "Mila was sitting right next to him and all he could do was stare at these beautiful fuckin' things all night," he murmured, turning me onto my back and climbing on top of me. As he kissed my neck, I wondered if he was more turned on by me or the fact that his friends wanted me. Blankly, I stared at the ceiling, trying to find the hot, desperate need that once took over my body the second Jackson touched me.

After all, I hadn't left him. I was still with him. The love I was so sure would fade was not quite gone despite everything that had happened and it was leaving me with conflicting feelings I couldn't reconcile. A part of me just wanted to go with what Jackson had suggested and never talk about Gabrielle again. I could go with the suggestion the police had put forth – that she had possibly run off due to recent stresses in her life. It was finals week after all, and she'd apparently skipped her first two already. A straight-A student before that, the cops deemed this the behavior of a runaway. It didn't help her case that many of her drawers were found emptied, and that close friends had claimed she was depressed as of late.

With all that said, the blood in her apartment seemed just an accident – the result of a drunkenly broken wine glass.

I found the theory dismissive but it was much better than my own paranoia, which had me wondering if I'd have been too wild with rage that

night to remember hurting her seriously. Maybe I had. After all, she'd bled. A lot. Had I hit her head? Had she had gone for a walk to blow off steam after our fight and fallen into the Hudson River?

I didn't know and I couldn't handle my guilt or paranoia alone. So I stayed with the man who had seen me through all my recent trials and tribulations. It felt right and wrong at the same time. With all our hearts, we loved one another. But my skin still crawled when Jackson touched me. All I could see were flashes of those tapes, of Gabrielle's wide-open mouth and his deep thrusts between her legs. In a way, I hated him. In another, I felt obligated to stay.

Because what if I *was* somehow to blame for Gabrielle's disappearance?

At my request, Jackson had deleted her panicked voicemail about me on his phone. But my bloody T-shirt was still nowhere to be found. While I found my jeans from that night washed in the dryer, the stained top was still missing. I asked Greta, our housekeeper, and repeatedly, she insisted that she'd never even seen the shirt in the laundry.

Twice, I dreamt of Jackson keeping it as evidence.

But it was a dream, not a premonition and regardless, I told myself that that wasn't my reason for staying. My reason was that we'd been perfect together for four years. I hated him now but I loved him as well. Clearly, that love was strong. Clearly, it meant something if he could do something so heinous and still have my heart. On top of that, my mind was in pieces over Gabrielle's disappearance. I couldn't handle any radical changes right now. I needed the familiar comforts of our apartment, my friends, Jackson and my shared social life. I needed distraction.

And Jackson himself. I was pretty sure I needed him too, even though I had yet since the incident to let him have sex with me.

"Fuck, Lara, how long is it going to be?" Jackson groaned when I stopped his wandering hand above my panties. He flopped onto his back, thrusting his fingers into his messy morning hair. It was still so cute to me – the only thing that ever made a man like Jackson look remotely boyish – but I couldn't bring myself to smile and giggle about it like I used to.

"I don't know, Jackson, it's going to take time. My heart is still broken and I'm putting the pieces back together on my own," I said between my teeth. After all, I couldn't tell anyone about Jackson's infidelity. Gabrielle was nowhere to be found and news of their affair would no doubt bring an

investigation to our home. I couldn't have that. And while Sloane would know that I had nothing to do with it, I couldn't tell her because she'd break her hand slapping Jackson the next time she saw him. And that, of course, would force Caleb to choose between his fiancé and his best friend of ten years, which would spark a drama that I didn't want, so I opted to cope solo. "Just give me time, Jackson," I exhaled, ruining my manicure by chewing its edges to nothing. My voice was a dead monotone. "It's going to pass but it's not going to happen right away. If you don't recall, you fucking cheated on me."

"And I regret it more than anything. I've never made a mistake this stupid before in my life and lately, I've been thinking about it every second of every fucking day. I dream about turning the clock back so it never happened. I can't stop reliving that day we fought and then you ran off with Sloane."

That was apparently how the affair started. On a random Thursday, I blew up at Jackson for lying to me about his smoking. For years I thought he'd quit, but the night of the Winter Ball, I found a pack of cigarettes in his Zegna suit pocket. At home, upon searching the rest of his closet, I found three more packs tucked neatly away in his shoe closet, hidden safely from my eyes. Still drunk off champagne, I screamed at him. We argued for an hour and while he slept that night, I opened a bottle of wine and booked a flight for myself to Naples. Sloane and her sister were already in Europe together so she met me there and we spent two-and-a-half weeks on the Amalfi Coast.

In that time, a neglected Jackson had apparently begun sleeping with Gabrielle.

"Three times. We did it three times in four months. Fucking Caleb's always ordering those fourth, fifth rounds when we're out. And she always happened to text when I was hammered. Saying things like she wanted me to tie her up. To make a video. That kind of shit."

"Yeah." My fingers dug into the mattress. "A video that you *jacked off* to while I was in the Hamptons with Sloane."

"I was watching it like any other porn, Lara! Just to get off while I waited for you to get home. Babe, goddamnit, I swear. She meant nothing to me. *You* – you're my world. You're the only person on this Earth I can't live without and it's killing me every day I feel this barrier between us. I don't feel like myself with it there. I get why it's there. I deserve it. But I

fucking want your body as much as I love you, Lara, and I need to feel you again. I *need* to."

"Or what? You'll cheat on me again?" I didn't mean to drawl with such attitude but I did. Jackson turned to stare at me and then suddenly burst off the bed, a frustrated growl escaping his throat.

"*No*. Absolutely fucking not." He paced for a second before stopping at the foot of the bed. Standing before me in his navy boxer briefs, Jackson stared at me, his six-pack rippling as he raked his fingers through his hair. "I'll never make a mistake with you again. But I need my girlfriend back. I need to feel my other half again soon because it's killing me. It's killing me to know that you're right next to me but we're nowhere near each other. You're somewhere else, far away and I miss the fucking hell out of you. I miss my girlfriend. That's all."

And with that, he got in the shower. Hugging my knees to my chest, I sat blankly in bed, swayed by Jackson's desperate words but still hollow inside, disconnected from him. Even as I watched him fully undress through the crack of the bathroom door, I felt nothing. I was used to wanting him so bad it hurt till I could touch him with my fingers but now my body was dreary, unfeeling, emotionless. And I hated it. I wished for the spell of conflicting emotions to end but had no idea when it would and it was driving me toward the edge of insanity.

If only I knew.

It would all end that very night. By that night, I would want – no *need* Jackson's arms wrapped around me again, his strong hands cupping my jaw and pressing his lips against mine. I would finally feel like we were us again. But the relief would come at a brutal cost.

Chapter Four

It started at Caleb's birthday party, held as usual at Buccieri Wall Street, a historic bank turned party venue. The morning of, Dane McNulty had texted Jackson a picture of his date for the night – some twenty-year-old Victoria's Secret model who was ninety percent legs. *Looks like I'm top dog tonight*, read the words accompanying his picture. Jackson's blue eyes flicked across the message with irritation. Scoffing, he tossed his phone on the bed and returned to buttoning his crisp white shirt.

"Nult's a fucking idiot," he sneered.

"Dane McNulty? What now?" I sounded almost interested.

"Nothing, he's just up to the same juvenile shit."

"Uh-oh." The "same juvenile shit" meant making everything into a competition. Dane McNulty had been with Kinsley Weiss for three years before leaving them to found McNulty Partners, which wound up ranking just above Kinsley Weiss in a list of top New York hedge funds the following year. Since then, Dane and his ballooned ego tried relentlessly to one up Jackson, buying the bigger country house and writing the bigger check at the galas. Still, the men of their shared social circle came to a verdict: Dane's net worth was higher but Jackson had better real estate *and* the most important trick up his sleeve: me.

I was no more beautiful than the other wives and girlfriends, but the boys in Jackson's circle forever adored me because of a silly little trick I always employed with them – one my mom had taught me back in middle school, when I ached to fit in. "*Always make sure to have a full conversation with every guest at the party, and make sure to talk to them about the one thing they love most. If you don't know anything about it, ask them to teach you*." That simple charm was what landed me more connections and acquaintances than the other girls, which then led to Jackson and my profiles in society columns and magazines. Those little portraits in our sitting room or before our Christmas tree gave us the attention Jackson didn't want to admit that he loved, even craved. Simply because it put us above his friends.

Jaw tipped upward, he knotted his tie deftly, no mirror needed. "He thinks I actually care about his game of one-upping."

I fastened my earrings distractedly. "You do entertain him every time."

Jackson laughed. “And I put him in his place every time. Because he’s a smug asshole. A smug asshole who’s gonna shit a brick when he sees the black dress you’re wearing tonight.”

“What black dress?” I frowned, having picked my pearl earrings based on a peach-colored gown I’d known for days that I’d be wearing. Jackson tightened the knot on his tie and grinned, looking so adorably mischievous that I had to crack a half-smile.

“The one in the Bergdorf’s box in my closet. Go put it on now.”

~

The only thing brighter than the lights outside Buccieri was Jackson’s beaming grin as he paraded me up the red-carpeted steps and through the towering front doors. Heart pounding, my eyes scanned the party for a server with a tray of champagne. I took shallow breaths, both nervous and excited in a wildly sexy number that was one shift away from becoming a full-body wardrobe malfunction.

With a racer back, the gown was sheer, black and floor-length, the bodice boasting an opaque and *very* well placed X shape that just covered my breasts, belly button and bikini area. Beneath the sheer parts, my heeled legs, braless cleavage and naked hipbone were exposed. It forced me to go without underwear, which in turn forced Jackson to gnash his teeth every couple of seconds and groan with true torment.

“I don’t know if I’ll survive tonight,” he murmured. “I don’t know what I was thinking putting you in that dress. Kind of forgot that I’d be as tortured as every other guy in the room.” Swiping two flutes of champagne off a passing tray, Jackson handed me one and tossed back the other. “Unless,” he murmured, his lips touching mine, “you let me take you home and fuck you tonight.”

“Jackson.” I smirked, relieved to feel a spark lighting my body. Perhaps it would be the night – the first night in ages that I could feel Jackson’s touch without seeing Gabrielle.

“I swear to God, Lara, I’ve never wanted to fuck you more than I do right now. And that’s saying a lot.” Jackson kept his hungry eyes glued to me as he ushered me into the dining room, his hand on the small of my back.

I laughed. I believed what he said. I’d never worn a dress like this before in my life. On top of that, Jackson had the highest sex drive I’d ever encountered and at this point, he’d gone nearly thirty days without having

sex. It was easily the longest time he'd gone without sex since losing his virginity at fifteen.

"Dear fucking *Christ*, Kinsley." The resonating voice that came out of nowhere belonged to Sawyer Davies, the group's wavy-haired prankster who'd, since grad school, gone from Ralph Lauren model to real estate tycoon. "Let me guess, you son of a bitch – you heard about McNulty bringing a VS model and had Lara put on this… this…" Running a hand through his coiffed, brown locks, he took me in, happily ruining his hair in the process. "Lara. Christ. You look beautiful as always."

"And you're looking very handsome yourself, Sawyer." I could feel Jackson's eyes on my ass as I leaned in to kiss Sawyer's cheek. The smirk on Sawyer's lips confirmed it when I stood up straight again.

"God, you fucking two," he shook his head. "Can you stop being so fucking *cute* and *sweet* together? Mila was just on my ass for never looking at her the way you look at Lara. You're fucking up my shit, brother," Sawyer joked, giving me another look from head-to-toe before shaking his head and going.

When he left, I peered at Jackson, who was already peering at me with smug satisfaction. "As if your head needed to get any bigger," I snorted.

He grinned, his broad shoulders struggling to shrug in his fitted, black suit. "I can't help that people envy our happiness," he said.

Our happiness? I blinked at Jackson as he continued ushering me into the party toward Caleb's main table. He didn't say the words with any hint of irony or sarcasm. *Our happiness.* He truly meant it. Jesus. I wondered if he was drunk already or if he simply loved me that much – so much that our relationship with awful, glaring issues was still better than what he could have with somebody else.

"Whoa, there! Happy birthday, me!" Caleb's eyes went wide when he saw me. Sloane's mouth dropped as she ran to me, arms outstretched. But when she got to me, she stopped short and gave me an air hug.

"I'm afraid to twist this dress around and expose your whole body!" she squealed. "Oh my God, Lara, where did you *buy* this?"

"This little pervert bought it for me," I smirked, nodding at Jackson. I looked up at him to find him looking elsewhere though – across the table at slick-haired Dane McNulty, who shook his head at the big, shit-eating grin on Jackson's face. He wiggled his eyebrows at Dane, as if asking, "*Yeah, you like that?*" Guessing the context, everyone at the table burst out

laughing. With Sloane wrapped around me in a hug, I joined in. It felt good. Familiar. I was starting to feel like myself again. I should've known that all it'd take was one of these parties with champagne, friends and Jackson's silly antics with his boys. Those things had always been a surefire way to put me in a good mood.

"It's so weird," Sloane murmured to me as the entrees were being brought out. She'd been nursing the same flute of Veuve all night but was already drunk – a downfall of being five-foot-six and a hundred and twelve pounds. Her jet-black hair spilled over my shoulder as she leaned her head on me, watching Caleb and Jackson give a hard time to some new guy at the company. "We're all just laughing and celebrating tonight like Lyle and Sofie aren't at home worrying like crazy about Gabrielle. What kind of friends are we to be out here drinking instead of trying to help them find her?" she asked.

I gave some generic answer that Sloane agreed to before I even finished. Clearly, it was the same thing everyone else had been saying. *"No, we have to keep living our lives or they'll feel worse," "Gabrielle's out there. We just have to put out positive energy for her to come home."* And within a couple minutes, Sloane was shrieking with laughter again, swatting Caleb's hand as he went from holding an ice-cold beer to slipping his palm into the cutout at the waist of her dress. "That's freezing!" she yelped, trying to wriggle away as Caleb lay his hand flat against her skin. Sawyer watched Sloane's body writhe against him before turning his gaze to Jackson.

"You gonna do that to Lara now or are we really gonna end this night with no wardrobe malfunction?" he asked.

His arm around my shoulder, Jackson shook his head at Sawyer. "You're a sick fuck, you know that right?" he smirked as I thought, *you love it.*

When I excused myself to the bathroom later, Jackson followed. I bit my lip, feeling a flutter in my stomach as I heard his neat footsteps on the marble floor behind me. But I decided not to look, not to let him know that I knew. I wanted to build up the excitement, the anticipation that I hadn't felt for Jackson in a month.

And it worked. The second I opened the bathroom door, he was on me. His chest pressed against my backside, he pushed me in, shutting the door behind us and pushing me up against it. Gripping my jaw, he opened

my mouth for his tongue, sweeping it against mine and then sucking hard on my lower lip. "I need you now," he grunted, his voice low, gravelly as his hand grabbed the X shape on my dress. Eyes gleaming, Jackson twisted till my breasts and pussy were exposed beneath the sheer fabric. Breathing hard, he took a few seconds to stare at me, his lecherous gaze feasting upon my naked body as if it had been starving for ages.

With a growl, he pushed my breasts up, kissing them over the sheer cloth of my dress. He took my tight nipple in his mouth, nipping, sucking as his other hand groped me roughly, with abandon.

In no time, I was pushed up against the sink, my hands gripping marble as behind me, Jackson gathered the bottom of my dress. Breathless, I watched through the mirror as his handsome face contorted with the desperate need to be inside me already. With one hand, he undid his belt, his zipper, pulling out his hot, hard cock. I moaned as he rubbed its head along the length of my wetness.

But the second I closed my eyes, I saw her.

"*Fuck,"* I hissed, standing up and pulling away.

"The fuck – ?" Jackson nearly fell over, having been a mere second from plunging himself inside me. I spun around to see him bewildered, his blue eyes wild and his pulsing hard-on tortured. "Babe, what – ?" Panting, he read the look in my eyes. "Fuck, Lara, *come on!*" His voice was hoarse with torment.

"You bent her over like that." I covered my face with my hands, desperate to erase the image of Jackson slamming into Gabrielle, those desk drawers rattling open in a noisy chorus with her moans. "Trust me, I do *not* want this scene playing over and over in my head! Every time I see it I think, 'He doesn't love me. He would never hurt me this bad if he really did.'"

Eyes blazing, Jackson roared at me like an animal. "I love you more than I can fucking *say!*"

Once he got dressed, he stormed out, leaving me alone in the bathroom, a shaking mess.

Chapter Five

"You're leaving already?"

Sloane's question took me by surprise when I returned to the table, which was otherwise empty.

"I – what?"

She took my hand and pouted her doll lips at me. "Jackson said you weren't feeling well and that you're leaving now."

Before I could answer, Jackson returned to the table with Caleb. "Yeah, she's going home," he said, casting a steely look at me that demanded I go with it. When I narrowed my eyes at him, he came around the table. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice still hard. "But you and I aren't going to be in the same room tonight without having some kind of blowup that's going to ruin this party so one of us needs to leave. I'd go but Caleb would kick my ass and it's his night. So just do me a favor, Lara, and go home."

"You're an asshole, Jackson."

Jackson looked elsewhere for a second to control his anger. "I'm not trying to be an asshole, I'm trying to *save this fucking night*. I can't look at you right now. It's not an insult – it's me being fucking in love with you and you hating my guts right now. So please. Just let me blow off some steam with the boys tonight and I'll see you at home."

I glared at him for as long as I could without warranting concern from Sloane. "Fine," I muttered.

And within forty-five minutes – since that was how long it took to say goodbye to our friends – I was in the back of a car, on my way back to the duplex. My mood was sour until Jackson's driver, Beck, read my mind and asked if I wanted to make a stop at "the little cart." He was referring to an empanada truck that was generally parked a few avenues away from our apartment. Whenever I found myself in the car without Jackson, I asked Beck to stop there. It was my deep-fried, guilty pleasure – one I didn't want Jackson to know about. Not that he was the picture of health with his smoking habit.

"Do you want to eat in the car?" Beck asked. "I'll park."

"Yes, please, that sounds awesome. They served such tiny little portions at the party," I laughed.

“That’s usually how those are, right?”

“Pretty much.”

Thirty minutes later, I was back at the duplex and fully sober thanks to the empanadas. But the second I stepped into the apartment, I stopped.

Something was off.

Standing in the doorway, I stared out at the sprawling space. The lights in the open industrial kitchen were on. Had I left them that way?

Clink.

My heart stopped at the sound I heard upstairs. I held my breath, waiting to hear it again. Hand pressed against my chest, I willed my heartbeat to slow down so I could hear something besides its thumping pulse in my ears. Did I imagine that?

Clink.

Christ. Was it a drip in the bathtub? No, this sounded more like something being picked up and put down. Something glass. My heartbeat picked up further as I waited to hear it again. But after ten frozen minutes at the doorway, I heard nothing and began to tell myself that I was crazy. My fight with Jackson had my mind rattled, overactive. *You’re imagining things*, I told myself. And so I dragged my full stomach and lazy body up the stairs to peel off my dress and draw a bath.

But in my bedroom, I saw a man.

“Oh God.” My cold stomach dropped like a brick as the stranger turned to face me, my diamond tennis bracelet in his hand. I turned and ran. I didn’t stop to look for another second. But a scream ripped from my throat when I felt my knees smash into the ground, my jaw bouncing against the hardwood floor as the strange man tackled me and rasped throaty expletives in my ear.

“Don’t fucking move, bitch! Don’t you fucking move!”

A rough voice. Hands gathering my wrists. A switchblade flicked open right in front of my eyes. On my stomach, I let him press my cheek into the ground, tears pooling under my right eye, the outer lashes drowning in them as he continued to curse. Through the corner of my left eye, I saw him pulling a black ski mask back over his face. *God, oh God, what the fuck.* Didn’t this only happen in movies?

“Now get up!” Disguised, he yanked me up by my dress. I cried out, dread pitting in my stomach as I felt my body exposing.

“Please, no, no, no – ”

"*Walk!*" he snarled when my knees buckled, tossing me to the ground only to yank me back up.

"Please don't hurt me, please, I swear to God I won't – "

"Shut your mouth, bitch!"

Face-first, I was hurled onto my bed.

"Head *down*, keep your fucking head down!"

I did as told. Shaking from head to toe, I laid on the bed, my breath hitched in my throat as I prayed to be wrong about what he might do next. Sobbing, my heart slammed against the mattress, beating so hard my insides rattled. It was painful. I cried and ached to simply lie on my side. All I wanted was to pull my knees to my stomach.

But when I so much as closed my legs, he yanked them back apart by the ankles.

I shrieked. "*No!*" Kicking, twisting, I fought harder than I had with even Gabrielle. So hard that I found myself suddenly on my back again, my wild arms swiping his mask half off.

Oh shit.

For the split-second I had, I stared. Six foot. Black mask. Birthmark. Sandy hair.

"*Fucking bitch!*"

And suddenly, I was blind. Breathless. Suffocating, my limbs flailed, bucking against the pillow he shoved hard on my face. Laying on me, he weighed me down, absorbing my fight, killing me slowly I was sure.

But then suddenly, I heard Jackson.

"*Get the fuck off of her!*"

The stranger lifted from me, I gasped for air. Coughing, choking, I rolled to my side, blinking my vision back in time to see Jackson's muscled six feet and three inches slamming the man to the ground, going beyond just holding him still. Ripping his mask off, he grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanking his head off the ground only to slam it brutally back down. Once. Twice. Three times before the switchblade came out.

"*Jackson!*"

I screamed and leapt off the bed, just as the strange man brought his knife down into Jackson's back.

Chapter Six

From the full bar of the yacht, I stared out at the turquoise water. Ibiza was exactly what I needed to escape the madness – specifically Ibiza in July. Clear skies, white sand and a low of seventy-five degrees.

Not to mention a hundred foot yacht on which to drink before the night's festivities.

"Christ, babe. You look fuckin' good in white," Sawyer came up behind me as I popped three perfect cubes of ice into a lowball. I snorted as he played with the fringe on the side of my bikini bottom, the smell of seawater and scotch coming off his skin as he peered over my shoulder. "You know, when you and I get married, we're going to wear these exact outfits down the aisle."

I finished pouring my Hendricks and tonic before turning around and bursting out laughing. Stretched over Sawyer's clearly endowed package were skintight, white trunks with aqua blue stripes up the sides. The prankster as usual.

"You're drunk, Sawyer, and I'd never marry you in that," I giggled, swatting his hand when he tried to play with the fringe hanging from my bikini top. "Hey. Nice try, buddy."

Mischief twisted his lips. "Can't blame a guy."

"No?"

"Not when you're as goddamned gorgeous as you are," he said, leaning in and reaching behind me for a bottle of scotch. He grinned as his chest brushed against mine – just enough to cause the slightest bounce. "Oh, fuckin-a," Sawyer took one look before squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth. He'd always been a charming terror when drunk. "That one I actually didn't mean to do. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, silly."

"You know you were always my dream girl, right?"

I giggled. "Sawyer, Jackson's gonna kill you. *You* know that right?"

The mention of Jackson's name plucked the smile from his lips. I frowned, unaccustomed to seeing Sawyer anything but jovial. "Yeah," he murmured, swaying slightly in his drunkenness. He looked down blankly at the bottle of scotch. "I know," he said, suddenly somber. "I know a lot of things."

“Yeah?” I tried to entertain him. “What kind of things do you know, Sawyer?”

His gaze returned to me. “Things that you’d wanna know,” he replied.

My eyebrows pinched. He was serious for once so I set my drink down. “Babe, what’s going on with you today? Is there something you want to tell me?” I asked.

But before he could answer, Sloane burst in from the tanning deck.

“Lara, Jackson’s about to do a back flip off the end of the yacht! Can you *please* stop him before he splits his frickin’ scar open?” she asked breathlessly before running back out.

Oh God, Jackson, damn you. Squeezing past Sawyer, I ran out as well, mentally cursing Jackson as I did so.

Something in him had changed since the invasion at our duplex five weeks ago. I would have predicted the opposite but he’d grown suddenly fonder of taking risks. Perhaps it was the fact that he’d been stabbed by a strange man who’d broken into our home. Or the fact that he’d grabbed the man’s arm before his blade could sink deeper than two inches. While the man escaped, he’d saved both his own life and mine. And since then, he’d been every kind of unpredictable. A week after the invasion, he booked a vacation for ten to Ibiza. A few days later, he got into a random bar brawl. The week after that, he purchased a four-story townhouse in Greenwich Village for twenty million dollars.

And now, on the deck of a yacht, in front of all our friends, he was on one knee.

“Oh my God.” The voice I heard was not my own. It was girly and breathless and muffled by my hands flying to my mouth as I watched Jackson. Surrounded by his boys, he opened a little, black velvet box. I burst into tears when I saw the actual ring – a single, *enormous* square-cut diamond on a fine platinum band.

I wish I could have frozen time and gathered myself enough to truly absorb the moment, because through my friends’ cheering and my own tears, I could barely hear Jackson’s beautiful speech about wanting to spend the rest of his life with me. But the most important part, I did hear.

“I will love you no matter what happens. No matter what dramas, highs, lows, trials or tribulations, I’ll be at your side through it all. Proudly. I know these guys tell you all the time but you’re the best thing

that's ever happened to me, Lara. And the only thing you can do to make me even happier is agree to be my wife."

Through tears, I gazed down at the hopeful smile on Jackson's impossibly handsome face.

"Lara, will you marry me?"

~

I hated the phrase but *making love* was what we'd done right after I'd said "yes." Our gaze hadn't broken once while he rocked into me. He'd come shortly after I had and as he held me, catching his breath, had murmured my name and his last. Lara Kinsley. He listed every way he loved me as I drifted off into sleep – a bride-to-be's lullaby. It was the definition of making love.

But *this* – this couldn't be considered anything but down and dirty sex.

Naked, I leaned over the railing of our balcony, my head cocked back and my waves gathered tight in Jackson's fist. Another hand groping my breasts, he thrust into me, his lips grunting, muttering filth in my ear. Our friends were down the hall but I couldn't help my shameless moaning as he sunk into me, occasionally torturing me by withdrawing his hot, hard cock and rubbing its pulsing head against the length of my wetness.

"Jackson, please," I whimpered as he stroked my clit with his dick.

Lusty amusement curled in his voice. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Put it back in," I breathed, moving my hips, desperately trying to fill the void his thick shaft leaves every time he pulls out of my pussy.

Jackson wrapped a strong arm around my waist, holding me still enough to continue teasing me with his smooth helmet. "No. I'm enjoying your squirming."

"Jackson, fuck me, *please*…"

"No."

Moaning with torment, I twisted out of his grip and threw my naked body onto the white chaise. *Fine, Mr. Kinsley. Two can play this game.* Lying back, I closed my eyes and spread my legs for my fingers, immediately relieving the mounting need he so deftly built up. Biting my lip, I sighed, one hand circling the sensitized pearl between my thighs with one hand, the other roughly fondling my breasts the way I knew Jackson liked. My back arched, I writhed with pleasure at my own touch.

On his heels, Jackson watched, a smirk on his lips as he stroked his cock, still slick with my wetness. "Is this your idea of punishing me?"

I shrugged one shoulder and played tough, eyeing him for all of a second before returning to myself. Arching my back, I reached between my legs with my other hand, sliding one, then two fingers between my wet folds. "Oh… God…" A sigh drifted from my swelling lips. Stroke by stroke, I quickened my pace, my breasts bouncing between my arms as I pleasured myself to the fullest. All the while, I watched Jackson. Vague envy curled his lip as he jerked himself off, his roving eyes watching my hands as they rubbed, thrust, did all the things that he wanted to do.

When he finally caved and stepped toward me, I kicked him away with a pedicured foot on his chest.

"Lara."

"Keep watching."

"You're going to let me fuck you right now."

I smirked. "Fuck off."

His jaw flexed. "You're gonna get it."

"I hope so."

He looked angry but I only grinned. Angry Jackson was wildly sexy anyway so stroking, pumping into myself, I moaned, continuing to kick him away from me for as long as I could get away with, knowing well that his cock got harder with every spurned advance. He knew he'd have me eventually. We were us again. Now, his sexual frustration was back to being a game – a delicious, exciting and torturous game.

With my fifth kick, Jackson caught my leg and mounted me, grabbing both my wrists with one hand and pinning them hard above my head. His free hand between my thighs, he stroked me, reveling in my wetness before spreading my legs and entering me.

"Ah… *fuck*, Lara." He grunted when I let him in halfway before tightening my muscles around his shaft.

"That's what you get," I smirked breathlessly, savoring the deliciously tormented frown on Jackson's gorgeous face.

"Baby," he pleaded, his lip twitching as I let him in another inch. I grinned, taking too much pleasure in rendering all six feet and three inches of his muscle helpless between my legs. "Oh fuck, yes, thank you, baby," Jackson groaned when I let him plunge back in me, his jaw dropping as he resumed pumping in and out of me, filling and un-filling me, bringing me closer and closer to the edge. "Christ, babe, you feel so fucking good," he

rasped, on his elbows, his eyes lost in mine. “You make me feel like the luckiest man on fucking Earth, Lara. I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you,” I breathed, thrusting my fingers in his dark blonde hair and pulling his lips against mine. Our mouths crushed against each other, he rocked deeper, harder, sliding his hands beneath my ass and forcing me to cry out as he pulled me so tight I could feel every last hot inch of him inside of me.

As usual, the sound of my orgasm forced his. A savage, guttural moan ripped from his throat as he came, spasms rippling his hard body before he let its weight collapse onto me, once again the security blanket I had loved for so many years.

Chapter Seven

On our last day in Ibiza, my lips woke Jackson with a warm *good morning* wrapped around his cock. I reveled in the sound of him rumbling awake and immediately groaning with pleasure. "Oh… fuck, babe." His blue eyes were electric as he lifted his head to get a visual on the sensation enveloping his morning wood. "Christ, babe, yes…" His fingers raked through my hair, grabbing fistfuls that grew tighter and tighter as I took him deeper and deeper in my mouth. I had woken up hot, eager to please him. I wanted to give my fiancé every last bit of pleasure I could offer. Gripping his shaft, I stroked, my mouth pumping up and down with my hands.

"*Fuck*, yes. Keep sucking. Just like that," Jackson grunted, his six-pack flexed as he watched me. When he came, I slid him out and pressed a kiss onto his pulsing helmet, relishing the sensation of his rich warmth pumping in thick ribbons onto my lips. "Holy fucking shit, baby." Jackson watched with unblinking awe as I licked them clean. "Fuck, baby," he grinned, catching his breath. "I can't fucking wait to make you Lara Kinsley."

When we finally emerged from our bedroom around 2PM, we were greeted with smug, knowing looks from our friends. Caleb laughed at the lazy satisfaction still spread across Jackson's face. He and Sloane raised their drinks at us while the others loudly clapped. I rolled my eyes and laughed but felt a quick frown pinch my brows when I caught Sawyer's reaction. He was usually the leader of this kind of mischief but today he simply sat back, stoic, expressionless. When I caught his eye, he looked away and took a long swig of his beer. *Where's my happy Sawyer? What's going on?* I wanted desperately to ask him and prayed that we'd get at least a minute alone at some point in the day, but we didn't, and I forced myself to brush it off. *He's just in an odd place since he broke up with his girlfriend. It has nothing to do with me.*

~

On our first full day back in New York, Sloane organized a dinner in celebration of my engagement. "Wives and girlfriends only, because we *need* to be able to talk at length about your future wedding dress," she said.

I was all for it. But I hadn't mentally prepared to see Sofie Winter. She hadn't attended any of our functions since the night that I had broken

into Gabrielle's apartment – the night that Gabrielle had gone missing. My stomach went instantly cold when I caught sight of her, polished as usual and wearing her million-dollar smile despite looking visibly thinner, aged. Guilt weighed in my stomach as I opened my arms to welcome her embrace.

"Don't laugh, Lara, but I actually cried when Sloane told me about the news!" she giggled girlishly. "I've always loved you and Jackson together. You were made for him. We all thought he was perfect already but when you came along, he was complete."

"Sofie," I exhaled with a trembling smile. My eyes welled and I told myself it was because of her kind words, not because of my nagging fear that it had been me. That in my wild, blind rage that night, I had somehow led to her daughter's death. *No, no, no.* That thought existed only in the dark place that I'd managed to escape for the entirety of Ibiza. I wanted to stay out of that place. Forever. Pulling away from Sofie, I forced myself to smile wide. "This calls for some drinks, doesn't it?"

I was on an empty stomach so thankfully, the first round of champagne cured my nerves. Over Moët and carpaccio, we spent the evening talking about Jackson instead of my dress. After two rounds, we were all rosy-cheeked and laughing. Emily Rocha asked for the story of how Jackson and I met and squealing with delight, Sloane told its censored version.

She had brought me to one of Sofie's big galas and had gotten quickly too drunk, leaving me to fend for myself, which proved difficult once Dane McNulty found me. He had introduced himself and immediately begun talking about a new building he'd purchased in SoHo, asking me if I wanted to see it. It had been an upscale clothing store beforehand and several nice pieces were left behind. He had a feeling I'd look great in them with "that incredible body." Needless to say, the way he spoke to my breasts made me uncomfortable, so I wound up recoiling and excusing myself, wandering out into the hall of the posh restaurant and up a winding marble staircase.

I found a half-naked Jackson in an empty room up there.

I froze and stared, unable to tear my eyes off of the strange man with the perfect face and perfect body. It felt like a daydream. I barely processed his stammer about why he was changing into a different tux. It felt as if I was actually blushing to death so I wound up running out. He chased after me, apologized, and then insisted he get me a drink downstairs

– as if seeing his ripped body in grey boxer briefs was some sort of traumatizing experience for me.

"Whew. I don't know how I would've reacted if I met Jackson like that, but I definitely wouldn't have run away," Emily fanned herself. "I can say that because I love Erik with all my heart," she added hastily.

As Sofie cooed something about me being "darling," I eyed Sloane – the only other person who knew that I wound up having sex with Jackson in the back of his car that night. It had been dirty, carnal, like nothing I'd ever done in my life. Fear had pulsed in my stomach the entire time he'd grasped fistfuls of my dress, piercing me with a hot, hard pleasure I'd never felt before. I was twenty-two at the time and until then, had only experienced unremarkable sex. I'd never so much as spoken to a man who looked like Jackson, nor had I slept with someone I'd only just met. I'd never experienced a real orgasm let alone two in one go. But in that first night with Jackson, I crossed all of those things off my list.

Even the nicest girls have a nasty side, Sloane had told me. *It just takes the right man to bring her out.*

I had a feeling that was true. My first time with Jackson had been unabashed and wild, but only because it felt right with him. It wasn't in my nature to do such a thing with anyone else. I wasn't that open. But with Jackson, I had felt an instant pull. A connection in the way he spoke and moved. He had lost his father in the same way I'd lost mine. He resented yet missed his brother in the same way I did my sister. By the time we touched for the first time – his hand on the curve of my waist – it had felt as if I'd known him for ages. It felt as if his hand belonged there.

With a happy sigh, I leaned back, letting Sloane take my bejeweled hand in hers. "Look at where we are, Lara," she murmured, resting her head on my shoulder. "We couldn't even dream this life in middle school. We didn't know it could be *this* beautiful."

It was true. In middle school, we had fantasized about moving to New York and finding rich boyfriends. We invented stories of where they would work and what kind of parties they went to. But we were from a small, dead town named Margaret, population three thousand twenty-four. Our imagination only went so far. We couldn't imagine the true luxury of being with our boys – the shining penthouses in Chelsea, the glittering galas under eighty-foot ceilings. The connections to anything we could possibly want –

courtside seats, private shopping trips, flights to Mallorca on a gleaming G6. We had a million times more than we ever thought we would.

Giggling, Sloane planted a kiss on my cheek. “I love you. And I love us. You, me, Caleb and Jackson. One big happy family.”

Champagne bubbling through me, I sighed with content, clinking my crystal flute against Sloane’s. Surrounded by friends, celebrating my engagement to the love of my life, I was absolutely certain that I’d never ever been happier.

Chapter Eight

I was walking out of my first bridal appointment on Monday when I bumped into Dane McNulty and his leering grin. Or rather, he had come up from behind me to say hello in his way.

"Miss Future Kinsley," he said, putting his hand on my lower back. I instinctively stiffened. "Just me, sweetheart," he grinned when we locked eyes.

Oh great. Even worse than a random stranger trying to touch me, I stretched my lips into a convincing smile. I loved my life with Jackson but one of the few downsides was the fact that I spent at least twenty percent of my time being pleasant for people I disliked. Dane topped that list of people, mostly because he gave me, as my mother would call it, the heebie-jeebies. He was handsome in a over-polished, cologne model kind of way. But his eyes were a predatory grey and every time he flashed that *I'm-mentally-undressing-you* smile, I wondered if the line on his cheek was an odd dimple or a terrible scar. He was all kinds of disconcerting.

"How are you, Dane," I asked, barely able to manage an upward inflection to my question. I didn't care how Dane was and I wished that kissing wasn't a customary hello in the world of Jackson's friends. I winced as I felt Dane's mouth linger too long on the hollow of my cheek. I flashed an overly sweet smile as I manually removed him from my body. He smelled like scotch. Barely noon and he had already been drinking.

Running a hand over his slicked back hair, Dane took me in from head to toe. "Better now," he said, his eyes sliding down the front of my saffron maxi-dress. "How are you, beautiful? Heard you all had a great time in Ibiza without me."

I didn't say anything. He hadn't been invited for a reason. Jackson generally tolerated Dane because many of his friends still liked him, and Dane did in fact have very envious connections. But since the invasion in our home, it seemed Jackson had lost all patience for appeasing others. All he wanted was to please himself. After all, life was too short.

But since I didn't want to explain that Jackson's near-death experience had spurred him to trim Dane from his life, I kept my mouth shut. I knew Dane would force our conversation to continue anyhow.

“In case you’re unaware I did Jackson a big solid recently. You should tell him it’s a bad look to accept my favors and then leave me out of plans with our friends. But eh, I’m sure he’ll make it up to me by the time we do the Hamptons for Labor Day.”

“Sure. Maybe,” I said flatly, certain that that was probably not the right response. I was used to feeling awkward around Dane, but usually because of his lewd comments, not his feelings of rejected friendship. Smirking, he pressed on.

“So what’s a pretty girl like you doing in wretched Midtown East?”

I barely wanted to answer. “Bridal appointment.”

“Mm, of course.” Dane slid his hands into his pockets, slightly swaying as he eyed my neckline. “I’m sure Jackson’s having you pick something obscenely tight.” His grin spread slowly as I pursed my lips into a line. I had no response because he wasn’t wrong about Jackson’s preference for skintight dresses. Silent and annoyed, I watched him break into a laugh. “Christ. You let him get away with everything, don’t you?”

That rubbed me the wrong way. “What are you talking about?”

“You know. The man can do whatever he wants.”

“Again, what are you talking about.”

He smirked casually. “Oh fuck me, I’ve said too much.”

I glared, knowing well that he expected me to grovel for an explanation. But since I refused, I flashed Dane that deliberately fake smile again. “Right. Well, always a pleasure.” I started past him but he stepped in front of me.

“You know, I always meant to tell you this little something but I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate.”

I stopped, jaw tightening as I anticipated some deeply vulgar compliment. “What, Dane?” I asked, allowing my tone to for once convey my impatience. Dane delighted in it, amusement dancing in his dark eyes.

“Do you want to hear it, sweetheart?” he wet his lips.

“Honestly, no. Not really.”

“Oh,” he feigned surprise, finally letting me go. “I guess he was right then,” he called after me. “Sawyer told me never to tell you.”

I stopped in my tracks, wondering when my heart had begun to pound. Hating myself for the satisfaction I was providing, I turned back to face Dane. “What about Sawyer?” I asked reluctantly, my pride aching. Dane’s

face was so smug now that I felt my fingers actually twitch with the need to slap it.

"Fuck, Lara. He's gonna kill me, but I have to say it," he said with a grin, his expression barely trying to match the phony regret of his words. "I was with Sawyer awhile back – we met this group of Brazilian girls at a party and went back to their hotel at night, fucked them, yada yada." Satisfaction twitched on his lips as he watched me wince. I didn't want to hear this part of the story but it was every bit like Dane to force others to hear about his sex life. "Fuckin' great night. Sawyer took the brunette, I had her friends. I think it was three of them, but I don't – "

"You can skip this part, Dane," I said between my teeth. He had to be wasted. He was always disrespectful but never to this degree.

"Right, right. Fast-forward then." Dane ran his thumb along his lower lip, savoring my curiosity before dropping whatever bombshell he had. "I fucked them, left their room – and guess which pretty little thing I saw in the hallway? Lyle and Sofie's Winter's daughter. Poor girl, they still haven't found her. What's her name again?"

My body went cold but my cheeks were aflame. "Gabrielle," her name barely choked from my lips.

"Yes. Gabrielle. She was wearing this lacey black dress, ended right about here." Dane reached to draw a line on my upper thigh. I pushed him away, my eyes stinging. I didn't anyone to know about Jackson's affair but if I could pick the last person I wanted to know about it, it would be Dane. "You wanna take a guess who I saw open the door for her?" he laughed, following me as I stormed past him.

"No, thank you," I muttered bitterly, tears brimming my eyes as I tried to speed past him despite my heels. He kept up effortlessly.

"So you already know about their affair and you're still marrying the guy," Dane marveled. "Christ, and here I thought you couldn't get better."

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I stormed down Park Avenue. The knot in my throat felt like I'd swallowed a ping-pong ball. Dane knew. Dane and Sawyer both. I had hoped to forget the affair like it never happened but as it turned out, there were still others in the city besides Jackson and myself – others who knew about the ugliest thing to ever unfold between us.

Dane pretended to offer comfort. "Hey, don't cry. At least you know for sure that he isn't still fucking her," he snickered.

The dark joke twisted my stomach. “Please just go, Dane,” I exhaled, fighting the knot in my throat. I was sure he couldn’t say anything worse at that point.

“Fine, I’ll go.” Clucking with mock sympathy, Dane rubbed my back and kissed my cheek. “But I don’t want you to cry, sweetheart, so try to take comfort in the fact that this is yesterday’s news. No need to dwell on something that happened two fuckin’ years ago.”

Chapter Nine

Two years ago.

I had frozen on the sidewalk and watched Dane walk away as I processed his last few words.

The fight about Jackson's smoking habit. The trip to Italy with Sloane. That was five months ago, when Jackson told me the affair first started. I'd thought the infidelity lasted only three nights in the downtown W. Three nights over the course of four months. It had taken every painstaking fiber of my being to forgive him for that short but shattering period of time. Jackson had been weak and I had been forced be strong. Strong enough to take him back and get past those terrible four months.

But now I knew the truth.

He had first slept with Gabrielle long before that. Almost two years ago. Had she even fucking been eighteen yet? For the second time, I was horrified, blindsided and betrayed by the man I loved.

In the dark of our bedroom, a near-empty bottle of Bordeaux on my nightstand, I stared at nothing. I had tried to convince myself that Dane was lying but then I thought about Sawyer. I remembered how he'd acted strangely in Ibiza, right before Jackson's proposal. "*I know a lot of things*," he had said, drunk and morose. "*Things that you'd want to know*."

He was referring to Gabrielle – to that night with Dane two years ago.

My heart twisted as I thought about Sawyer forcing Dane to keep his mouth shut. It was for my sake. I was friendly with everyone in Jackson's boys club but Sawyer was an actual friend to me. With both Jackson and Sloane prone to overdrinking at parties, he was my savior – my replacement date-slash-best-friend with whom to laugh and dance when everyone else was too drunk to get out of their seats anymore.

"Lara?"

The light flicked on and my dark gaze moved toward the door, where Jackson stood.

"Babe?" he frowned. "What are you doing?"

"You slept with Gabrielle two years ago."

Jackson froze. "What are you talking about?"

"I ran into Dane McNulty on Park Ave today."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And he told me that he saw you at the W with Gabrielle Winter – *two fucking years ago*, Jackson," I snarled, my voice reedy as I pulled the words out of my tight throat. I swallowed hard, furious with the remorse creasing Jackson's brow. It was the same one as last time and I wanted something new. I wanted him to look broken, devastated, like me. "What the *fuck*, Jackson?" I ripped my body out of bed. "What do you have to say for yourself? You said it started with Gabrielle when I was in Italy with Sloane but that was this fucking *February*, Jackson, and now I'm hearing that you first fucked her two *years* ago?" I shoved him away when he came to me, so hard that he stumbled backward. "What the fuck was she, Jackson? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen."

"*Fuck you!*" I screamed. I was wild, unhinged. "Don't you fucking dare act like this is hurting you, this is hurting *me*. This is humiliating *me.* I believed you. I believed everything you said. That you'd never hurt me again, that you loved me – "

"I do love you, Lara, please just fucking listen to me for a second," Jackson pleaded firmly. Tears blurred my vision as he held me tight. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't want it to count like that, Lara. That night two years ago – that was the year the fund had that fucking disastrous January, we were down three percent, I was stressed the fuck out and I didn't want you to see me looking like a wreck at home so I booked a hotel room to just cool off for a few hours. All I wanted was to smoke without you getting mad at me. And before I could even get to my room, I ran into Gabrielle and her friends in the bar downstairs. They were all drunk, they started flirting with me and I – fuck, I don't know, I thought they were all twenty-one since they were drinking!"

"Please!" I fought out of Jackson's grip to wipe the hot tears streaming down my cheeks. "Like that makes it any better that you *fucked* her that night!"

"I didn't *fuck* her that night, Lara! I… I got drunk, okay? I was stressed out, I had just spent millions of dollars renovating the apartment for us and suddenly business fucking nosedived. So I got drunk and I let her flirt with me and I… let her come up to my room. We drank together, we talked together, and we…"

"If you didn't fuck, what did you do?" I demanded. Jackson's jaw flexed. My lip curled at his stone expression – like he was preparing for my

wrath. My heart slammed against my ribcage. “What did you do, Jackson?”

“I let her suck my cock.”

“You son of a *bitch!*” I thrashed against him, pained cries escaping my throat as he gripped my forearms, trying to hold me still.

“I’m sorry, Lara, it meant nothing, I swear to fucking Christ! I barely remember that night,” Jackson rasped as I fought him. “I’m sorry. I wish we could pretend this never fucking happened.”

“How?” I screamed, tearing myself away from him. “How do I know you aren’t lying again? How do I know it meant nothing if you did it again later? How am I going to *marry* you when you have no idea what you’ve done to me? I can’t even begin to describe the hurt right now, the – ” The knot in my throat stole my last words. Tears drowned my eyes as I stood there, speechless, too wounded to fight. Though when Jackson tried to come near me, I pushed him back. When he tried again – I shoved him harder.

“What can I do, Lara?” he asked, desperate. “What can I do? If you tell me what to do to make it right, I’ll do it. Okay? I’ll do it because I need you, Lara, you’re my wife.”

“I’m not your fucking wife,” I spat. Jackson stepped back and put his hand on his stomach, as if my words had speared him there. He was quiet for a second, his blue eyes clouded with anguish.

“Do you want to leave me?” he finally asked.

Yes, I wanted to answer. But instead, I glared with contempt for two seconds before crumbling to the floor, sobbing. I wanted to leave and I didn’t. I loved him and I didn’t. I had no idea what to do. But as I imagined my life without Jackson, I felt my heart become a cold, heavy rock in my chest. It felt like it had stopped beating.

“I don’t want to leave you. But I don’t know how I’ll forgive you,” I muttered. Out of tears, my dead stare bore into the ground. “We’ll love each other again like we always do but there’s always going to be a dark hole that’ll never be filled because I’ll never understand why you did what you did.” I looked up at him, wanting to hurt him with my next words. “I know you love me, Jackson. But you don’t love me as much as I thought you did.”

A dark satisfaction spread through my chest as I watched him wipe his eyes before any tears could fall. He shook his head, his mouth parted as he

tried to speak but came up empty. We stared at each other in silence for a full minute before he found his words. "I would die for you, Lara," he finally said.

Please, I wanted to say, but instead, tears sprung to my eyes, my body remembering the night of the intruder before my brain would. It was no lie. Jackson would die for me. He almost did. Lip trembling, my eyes dropped to his ribs, where he had been stabbed. Feeling myself soften, I repeated the words that would remind me why I was angry. "You'll never know how I feel."

"I can," Jackson immediately offered.

My face contorted. "How?" I demanded.

Jackson drew a deep breath. He ran a hand down his face and sat at the edge of the bed. "It was just sex," he said into his hands. "If you had sex with someone besides me, you'd get it too. You'd fuck him but in the end, you'd still love me."

I stared, unblinking. I couldn't possibly be hearing what I thought I was. "What are you saying right now, Jackson? Are you telling me to have sex with somebody to get back at you?"

With a look of resignation on his face, Jackson looked up at me and said, "Yes."

Chapter Ten

There were rules involved with our deal.

The next morning, when our eyes were dry and the offer was still on the table, I accepted. I showered and got dressed for my day while Jackson sat up in bed. I imagined that he stayed there for the next few hours, pained as he drew up the terms of our agreement.

After several bridal appointments with Sloane, we went for dinner in SoHo. We were on dessert when Jackson called. I excused myself to the bathroom to answer.

"It can't be any of the guys," he said before I could even say *hello*. "My friends. Their friends. Their employees. Anyone who runs in the circle or has anything to do with it. Find someone who has nothing to do with my friends, fuck him and tell me when it's over."

I was quiet for a second, letting it all sink in. "What, just once?" I asked, my voice hard. It was Jackson's turn for silence. I could practically hear him gritting his teeth.

"Do you really need it more than once?" he finally asked.

"You did."

He exhaled with frustration. "Lara."

"You fucked her three times. As far as I know. Maybe it was more."

"It was three times, Lara, and fine. Fuck whoever it is three times. But I don't want this hanging over my head, so get it over with fast, give a fake name and don't bring him into our home. I have a lot of shit going on right now. The whole Monarch disaster is driving me insane."

I rolled my eyes. The upcoming Monarch hotel was bleeding Jackson's money every day its grand opening was delayed. The restaurant and lounge inside wasn't up to par and the hotel refused to open its doors till it was remodeled. But I knew from Sawyer that some new partner had signed onto the project, and that their investments would all be put to good use soon. So in comparison to Jackson and my relationship, the situation barely qualified as disastrous. Not to me at least. "Don't worry, Jackson," I said bitterly. "I'll be sure to fuck someone tonight.

He started about four different angry sentences, finishing none before giving an animal-like snarl and hanging up.

And for the next five minutes, I stayed in the bathroom. Holding my phone, staring at my reflection in the mirror, I wondered how the hell I'd gotten here, and if Jackson and I were by far the two most fucked up people in our circle of friends.

~

After parting ways with Sloane, I sat in the back of Jackson's car, Beck waiting around in the driver's seat as I bounced my knee and tried to think of where the hell to go to pick up a stranger. It was the oddest situation I'd ever been in and I wished desperately that I had someone to consult with. But I didn't so sitting anxiously, I simply tried to think of neighborhoods that Jackson and his friends would die before stepping foot in. Times Square? No, even I couldn't bear to go there. The East Village? Too many college kids.

It took me another ten minutes to finally decide on Brooklyn.

It was perfect. Brooklyn was full of trendy but low-key bars and beautiful, young people, none of whom would know Jackson. He and his friends regarded the borough as the place where others went after popping out three kids and deciding to become "grass-fed, organic people," as Sawyer put it.

Within twenty minutes, I was on Water Street in DUMBO. I was risking it – if Jackson's friends *were* to hang out anywhere in Brooklyn, it would be posh and polished DUMBO – but I wanted to have drinks at a nice bar, so I stuck with my choice. If I was going to sleep with a complete stranger, he should at least be a put-together man of taste.

My buzz dying, I rushed into the first restaurant I saw.

It was a sexy, dimly lit place with brick walls and a beautiful, reclaimed wood bar. Soft, amber light glowed throughout the long, narrow room, somehow managing to soothe my nerves. Not completely, but there was booze for that. Taking a seat, I ordered a Manhattan, knocking it back so quickly I had to shudder.

"Whoa, hey, I take pride in my drinks," the bartender laughed, setting a coupe glass in front of me. "This one's on me, but you have to savor it. Really enjoy it."

Tipsy, I nodded, all the while considering him as a prospect. He was handsome, well groomed, probably an aspiring actor like most New York bartenders. *Eh.* For no reason I could identify, I passed. *Too pretty*, I finally told myself. Sipping my drink, I looked around. The handsome-ish

guy next to me stared in a way that reminded me of hormonal high school boys, and that turned me right off. *Come on, give me something good,* I prayed to the non-existent God of one-night stands.

Hm. The chef who emerged from the kitchen was indeed attractive – fit, blue-eyed like Jackson, but with a shaved head and tattoos peeking out of his rolled up sleeves. He would certainly be a departure from my usual tastes. But again, for no real reason, I quickly dismissed him. *Of course you're going to make this as hard as possible,* I groaned at myself, a second from giving up on the mission.

But then, my heart jumping into my throat, I spotted him.

Chapter Eleven

I froze, our eyes locking so instantly that I panicked, wondering if we knew each other somehow. *No*. I would've remembered meeting someone who looked like this. At six-foot-four, he towered over the woman with whom he emerged from the door marked "Employees Only." Perhaps he was a manager? The owner? Whatever he was, I was thankful that he was polite enough to return his eyes to the woman as she spoke to him, because it gave me the opportunity to freely check him out.

He was a walking fantasy. Dark hair. Emerald eyes. Gorgeously tanned. In a white V-neck and jeans, he managed to look better dressed than even the chic and buttoned-up clientele. It probably helped that he was built and carved like a Greek god. The hard lines of his chest muscles were visible from under the cotton of his shirt. Sipping endlessly on my Manhattan, my eyes swept him from head to toe. I wasn't usually a fan of beards but he sported one that was sexy, well trimmed – the definition of masculine. Heat bloomed in my cheeks as I wondered what his facial hair would feel like against my lips.

Between my thighs…

Whoa.

I stopped myself and the bartender grinned at my flushed expression. "Yeah, he has that effect," he said, shaking his head before suddenly standing at attention as he looked behind me. I held my breath, feeling the heat of a tall, broad body only inches from my back. Tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, I turned to see the devastatingly handsome Greek god pointing to my drink and then holding up two fingers.

"Two Manhattans, got it. Didn't realize you knew each other," the bartender said, blinking and disappearing to the end of the bar before I could correct him. Biting my lip, I watched the gorgeous stranger ask the man beside me if he minded moving down a seat. The man sputtered, seeming to realize that he'd officially run out of time to talk to me.

"Do you know her?" he asked, his last attempt to keep his seat. Green Eyes looked at me and grinned so irresistibly that my toes curled.

"Yeah, she and I go way back."

Despite sensing our lie, the man beside me moved down one and my heartbeat rose as Green Eyes took the seat. "So you and I go way back?" I

lifted an eyebrow at him.

"To about a minute ago when I came out of that employee door," he replied with ease. I bit my lip as I watched the corners of his twist with mischief. "Not a fan of lying but desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Of course," I humored him. "And what kind of desperate times were you facing just now?"

"Seeing the hottest woman I've ever laid eyes on at a bar and not being the guy sitting next to her."

"Mm. Tough life."

His eyes glinted with amusement. "It was a trying time but it's over with," he laughed as our drinks came up

"Cheers to that."

"Cheers." His eyes remained intent on me as our Manhattans clinked. "So, are you meeting someone here?"

I smiled. "Is this your subtle way of asking if I have a boyfriend?"

"Yes. Do you?"

I swallowed, realizing that it was my time to jump and truly commit to this night. "No," I finally answered. *Just a fiancé.* "And yourself – a girlfriend?" When he shook his head, I raised my brows with surprise.

"What?"

"I guess that's just… hard for me to believe."

"Yeah? And why's that?"

I laughed, half-sheepish. "You can't guess? Haven't you ever looked at yourself in the mirror?"

"Let's pretend I haven't so I can force you to spell out for me what it is you're trying to say," he smirked.

Cheeks burning, I bit back my giggle. "You want me to recite for you all the ways that I find you physically attractive?"

"Absolutely. I have a feeling that'd be a huge turn-on for me," he grinned.

"I don't even know your name yet."

"Nor do I know yours. What is it?"

Umm. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. "It's… Tara." A slight modification.

His laugh was skeptical. "Is it?"

"No."

“Alright. In that case my name is Max.”

“Is it?”

“No.”

Works for me, I giggled, watching Max’s eyes dip to my braless breasts as I shrugged, causing a slight jiggle underneath my gauzy sundress. Unconsciously, I’d done that on purpose. I loved giving Jackson leg massages after he came back from the gym, pretending not to notice as he watched my breasts shake while I vigorously rubbed his thighs. It was hot, letting him get torturously hard as a rock before I got on my knees and relieved him. *Except you shouldn’t be thinking about Jackson right now,* I told myself. Eyeing Max, I smirked, letting him know that I’d caught him looking.

“Sorry about that.”

“Mm-hm, you look very sorry.”

His laugh was something low and painfully sexy. “Fine, I’m not. That was… easily the hottest two seconds of my life.”

“And that was with my dress still on,” I smirked, surprising myself. *Oops. Guess the Manhattans are kicking in.* Max lifted his eyebrows, his green eyes trying to read me. A slow smile curled his lips as he shook his head.

“Yeah. You’re good at torturing guys, aren’t you?”

“How am I torturing you?”

“Do you want the truth or the censored version?”

“I mean we already lied about our names, we might as well go with total honesty for the rest of the night.” I felt something naughty tug at the ends of my lips. “Go ahead. Tell me exactly how I’m torturing you.”

“Wait, I do believe it was *your* turn to say what you liked about me before we got distracted by each other giving fake names.”

“Fine.” I raked my lower lip between my teeth. “Well, I’m sure you’re aware, considering every pair of female eyes in this room has been glued to you since you walked through that door, but you’re… very attractive. And in case you didn’t realize, a plain white T-shirt on a tall, muscular man is pretty much every woman’s Kryptonite, so good job with that,” I giggled, plucking the skewer from my drink and sucking off the cherry. When I returned my eyes to Max, I caught him shifting in his seat, a hand cupped around his package as he arranged it. I arched an eyebrow.

“Sorry. Just fixing myself,” he laughed, sheepish.

“What, running out of room in there?” *Oops. Again, it just came out.* My pulse quickened as Max’s brows shot up. The tantalizing grin that spread his lips prompted a sudden throbbing between my legs.

“Honestly, yes. Space has been limited since you made yourself…” He eyed my chest. “Bounce around like that.”

“Since I what?” I played coy.

“Since you shook those perfect tits in my face.”

Shit. I pressed my knees together, the pulsing in my thighs spreading through my body, unfurling hot in my stomach. Max watched me squirm in my seat, his unblinking gaze merciless.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked, his voice both smooth and wicked. Despite being hot already, I prolonged our game.

“I’ll tell you after you tell me why I’m torturing you.”

“Right,” Max laughed, his gaze on my legs as I continued to writhe. My body prickled with such heat that I could feel every shift in my dress, every stroke of the fabric against my tingling skin. “Well, for starters,” his stare trailed up my thighs, my stomach, between my breasts. It landed finally upon my swollen lips, willing them to softly part. “You’re gorgeous. Unbelievably. You’re the kind of beautiful that made me feel like I needed to act fast because I knew every other set of eyes in the room was already on you. On these lips. This little dress. Those legs. I knew I wasn’t the only one who’d taken one look at you and started fantasizing.”

“Fantasizing,” I repeated, swallowing. “About?”

“The uncensored version?”

“The exact words you were thinking.”

With a smirk, he leaned forward, his shoulders broadening. “Alright. I thought about what you’d look pressed up against this bar naked. How it’d feel to put my hands all over your body.”

“Those were the exact words you used in your head?” I asked dubiously.

Max’s green eyes hardened. “Fine.” A ravenous look glazed over them as his gaze traveled across my chest. “I thought about ripping your clothes off and squeezing those perfect tits. I thought about licking your skin. Sucking on those nipples that I can already see through your dress since you clearly aren’t wearing a bra.” Jaw clenched, I could see Max getting turned on. “And I thought about how fucking wet I knew I could get you.”

“Is that it?” I teased.

“No.”

“Then go on.”

Max’s eyes followed my movements as I gathered my hair off my hot neck. “I think we should stop it here.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s getting literally too hard for me to talk about this. And the way you keep squirming in your seat is only making it worse.”

Chewing on my lip, I dropped my gaze to Max’s zipper. *Holy. Shit.* My eyes traced the thick outline of his erection, which snaked down the left leg of his jeans. Fingers curling around the edge of my seat, I tried to resist the urge to wrap my hands around his girth – to stroke till I could feel just how many inches it took to reach his helmet.

“Really though. I think it’s time for you to tell me why you keep doing that,” Max said, that devious expression returning.

I looked back up. “Doing what?”

“Squirming.”

I could feel my blood rushing as I murmured so no one else could hear. Did I really want to say this in public? “I’m turned on,” I mumbled.

“What was that?”

“I’m turned. On,” I enunciated with attitude. “The same way you’re getting hard as a rock under your jeans." Sucking on my naked cherry skewer, I let my eyes linger on Max’s jeans. I could actually see the denim fighting against his pulsing arousal. It made every inch of me ache to feel it – in my hands, between my legs, anywhere. I drew in a deep breath. *I can’t be in public another second*, I realized.

To my incredible relief, Max read my mind. “Do you want to get out of here?”

“Yes,” I answered truthfully. “So fucking badly.”

Chapter Twelve

I awoke in the morning to a stiff cock pressed against my back. A sleepy grin tugged at my lips as I reached behind me to fill my hands with its pulsing warmth.

It wasn't till I opened my eyes that I remembered where I was.

"Baby," Jackson murmured, his smile audible in his half-sleep. I froze. It was at that moment that I flashed back to last night – to Max. To being bent over a staircase because we couldn't make it to his bedroom.

Oh God.

I felt Jackson hardening in my grip as images of last night flashed through my mind. I couldn't remember the car ride to Max's apartment but I did remember that it was short. He lived only blocks away, but walking would've been impossible for us.

I whipped my dress off the second I got into his duplex. I had been halfway up the staircase when he grabbed me from behind, his hands all over my body as he crushed a hot kiss against the back of my neck. I gasped for breath, buckling to my knees. My fingers gripped the ledge of the step above me and my heartbeat pulsed in my ears, joined by the sound of Max's clanking belt buckle. I stared at my scarlet manicure as I heard the crinkling of a condom behind me. From his pocket. It didn't surprise me. I thanked God for it as he slid it on, his tongue drawing a wet, torrid line on my skin as his free hand reached around to cup my pussy.

"Good girl," he panted in my ear as I grinded my hips against his palm, every nerve ending in my body on fire as I pleasured myself with his touch.

I'd already come by the time he yanked my panties down to my knees. The screaming pleasure was instant when he drove every inch of himself inside me, his thrusts immediately long, deep, so powerful that I felt myself unraveling. The pleasure that seared through me was unreal and somehow, it intensified by the second. I didn't recognize the sounds that hurtled from my lips as he drilled into me. All I could do was hold on for dear life, my hands grasping for the stair up. I dug my nails into the wooden floor, my arms taut as Max plunged in and out of my soaking pussy, holding my body against his torso with two strong hands wrapped around my breasts.

The second orgasm ripped through my body so forcefully that I'd gone instantly limp. I moaned endlessly, delirious as Max came, his body jerking

with every long, hot pump inside me.

It had been some of the best sex I'd ever had in my life. And I hated myself for dreaming about it all night while sleeping next to Jackson.

"Baby, you're so wet," Jackson murmured into my hair as he easily slid a finger inside me. A breathy whimper seeped from my lips. I held my breath when I felt his free hand form over mine. He slid my palm up and down, guiding it in slow strokes against his shaft until it felt like I was rubbing hot stone. "I need to put it in, Lara," Jackson exhaled, wrapping an arm around my waist and bending me at the middle. But just as I felt the head of his cock at my opening, I tore away.

"Wait." A pang of guilt flashed in my chest as I crawled hastily out of bed. Standing on my side of the mattress, I stared breathlessly at Jackson, who stared back with confusion until his morning grogginess faded. His blue eyes blinked twice before hardening into a glare. I assumed that he was recalling the fact that he'd gone to bed alone, that I hadn't joined him until sometime past two in the morning.

"Right. Was it good?" he asked, stone-faced.

I was silent as I stood before him, trying to identify my feelings. Why did I feel such overwhelming shame? I had done exactly what Jackson had told me to do so we could resume some sort of functioning relationship. But a heavy guilt remained. *Because you enjoyed it way too much,* I told myself. *Because you haven't stopped thinking about him since you left Brooklyn. Not even in your sleep.*

Shit.

Jackson broke the silence. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"No."

With steely eyes, he stared for another second before ripping the sheets off his body and getting out of bed. "I have an important meeting at noon."

I was thankful for the topic change. "With the other Monarch investors?"

"Someone else," Jackson answered, his voice hard. "You need to meet him so get showered and dressed. We're running late."

Chapter Thirteen

I stared in disbelief at Jackson but he looked decidedly out the window as we turned onto Nineteenth Street. I couldn't believe what he had just told me so casually, as if it weren't extraordinary news. "Babe, how can you be so nonchalant about this? You do realize that I've never even *met* him before, right?"

We were on our way to meet Jacob, Jackson's younger brother, who had flown into New York that morning – for the first time in five years.

The first night I'd met Jackson, he had been changing into one of Jacob's tuxes. His new home gym had paid off in new muscle but had cost him money by rendering his wardrobe useless, too narrow for his new form. Luckily, he had, at his mother's request, kept all of Jacob's old tuxes.

"He doesn't need them where he is," Jackson had explained to me with a laugh.

"And where is he?"

"Australia, Morocco. He's somewhere new every year but wherever he is, it's definitely not New York, and he's definitely not wearing a tux."

Jackson was decidedly quiet about Jacob, so my knowledge of him was paltry. But over the years, I'd picked up more bits and pieces of information. He was in architecture and real estate, or something like that. I knew early on that Jacob had taken their father's death particularly hard. He disliked the fact that his mother remarried so quickly and clashed instantly with their troubled stepsister, Audra. Jackson had also implied on a few occasions that Jacob had left at a disastrous time – a time when he had needed him most. But whenever I inquired about what he had needed him for, darkness clouded Jackson's face and he reverted to the same reply every time: "He was my best friend for twenty years. I just wanted him around."

It was too simple of an answer and I knew that there was much more to the story. But since meeting Jackson, neither Jacob nor Audra were very present in his life, so I didn't ask. It was an obvious sore subject that reminded me of how I'd grown up hating my neighbors' questions about where on Earth my sister had gone, so I kept my mouth shut. I was just happy to know that every once in awhile, Jackson went to visit Jacob in whichever exotic city he was living in, and that he always came back on a

high, rambling on and on about Jacob's boat and whatever water sports they'd done.

But every time, he'd go back to being quiet about him within days. "Please just drop it, Lara. It's not going to happen," he'd say whenever I asked if Jacob might visit New York next time around. It broke my heart. In our four years together, I started regarding Jacob Kinsley as a myth. A legend. Something I'd never live to see.

So it was a miracle for me to get into the car and hear the words, "*We're meeting Jacob for lunch. He flew into LaGuardia this morning."*

I smacked Jackson playfully on the arm. "Are you looking out the window to hide your excitement, you nerd?" I asked. I didn't care that we'd been fighting just this morning. Jacob's return called for all-around forgiveness so we could sooner celebrate the occasion. "Jackson! Stop pretending that you aren't happy right now."

"Lara," his voice came back at me sternly. But when I leaned forward to look at him, I caught his smile. "Stop it," he laughed when I gasped and cupped his jaw, facing him to me.

"Oh my God. You are *so* excited, Jackson Kinsley."

He rolled his eyes, trying but failing to bite back a grin. "Yes, I'm very excited, Lara. Will you let go of my face now?"

I planted a big kiss on Jackson's lips before letting him go. But I couldn't help the big, dork grin on my face. We'd had a rough start on the morning but now I couldn't be happier. Jacob's arrival had given us reason to cheer about something. Together. It was a brief return to normalcy and I loved it. I was so ecstatic I actually bounced in my seat.

If only I knew that my joy would quickly come crashing down – harder than anything I'd ever felt in my life.

Chapter Fourteen

"Mr. Kinsley, we've already seated your guest at your table," the bow-tied host at Broome Street Kitchen presented a dazzling smile before whisking us to our usual booth overlooking West Broadway.

The blood drained from my face when I saw who was already seated there.

Please, God, be kidding.

It was Max.

Greek god Max. Max from the bar in DUMBO. The *apartment* in DUMBO. I froze behind Jackson, my stomach turning so violently that I almost buckled over. I gripped the edge of an empty table as I tried to compose myself. But I was reeling. Seated where my fiancé's brother was supposed to be was the man who had fucked me on his floor less than twelve hours ago.

I white-knuckled the polished wood when his green eyes found me. I thanked God for the manager who swooped in to greet Jackson as his brother nearly dropped his Manhattan into his lap. Mouth parted, the other Kinsley brother stared at me.

I wanted to run. How was this possible? I had seen pictures of Jacob Kinsley before. They were from his college days but wouldn't I have recognized him still? He resembled Jackson. Their coloring was different – Jackson's eyes were blue, not green and his hair blonde, not brown. But they did look like brothers.

"Babe," Jackson called to me once he was done chatting with the manager. "What are you doing?"

"I – I tripped on a," I looked down at my clear path, "thing."

"Well, stop tripping on things and come here."

I did as I was told, willing my heeled feet to move. My heart thumped when I caught Max – no, *Jacob* – looking down at my bare legs for a second before angrily ripping his eyes away, instead digging his stare into the table and pressing the end of his fist to his mouth. He looked angry and suddenly, so was I. *If you had just told me your real name and shaved your beard before today, I would've known it was you,* I decided as I approached the table.

“Alright, well since this moment is long past due,” Jackson started. True excitement stretched his lips as he gestured at the man who still had my panties from last night. “Lara, this is my brother, Jake. Jake, this is my fiancé, Lara.”

My gaze turned stiffly to Jake and I watched in slow motion as his expression went from contained fury to something passably cordial. He held out his hand – the hand that had brought me to orgasm last night on his stairs. “So nice to finally meet you, Lara,” Jake said, his cold eyes discordant with the friendly tone of his voice. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

I turned on my gala charm. “All good things I hope,” I flashed a winning smile as I shook his hand. The sensation of our skin on skin made my knees feel weak.

“Babe,” Jackson laughed, watching my legs shake in my short Pucci dress. He put a hand on the small of my back and turned to Jake with a laugh. “Weights. We have a gym in the apartment and she likes to do kettlebells at night when she can’t sleep.”

That was true but obviously not for last night. My cheeks were on fire as Jake watched me slide into the booth.

“Strenuous exercise puts me to sleep too,” he said as he fixed his stare on me. “In fact, it’s the reason I slept so well last night.”

A flash of heat surged through my body. “Yeah… I love kettlebells,” I said lamely.

His emerald eyes seared into mine. “I’m more a fan of the stairs.”

Please don’t. Fear prickled up my thighs and I glared at Jake as our server came tableside. I shook my head, silently pleading that he not. *Please do not reference the fact that we had filthy, sweaty sex last night when I’m sitting right next to your brother, my fiancé. Please*.

As Jackson ordered our usual drinks, I dared to mouth the word “*stop*” across the table. Jake sneered and shook his head at me. *What the fuck?* I may or may not have mouthed that to him as well. Thankfully, before he could respond, Jackson turned to him.

“What are you having, man? A Manhattan? Since when do you drink anything but beer?” he asked. When he put an arm around my shoulder, I joined him in smiling placidly at Jake, waiting for an answer. But my heart was pounding like a hammer.

“I don’t know. I met a girl who drank them and it kind of stuck.”

Jackson grinned. “She must’ve been pretty smoking hot to stand out to you. Remind me – how many girls do you take home a week? Anywhere between ten and twenty, right?”

My cheeks burned as Jake laughed that low, sexy laugh. “Ballpark. But yes, she was smoking hot. Definitely way too hot to be single.” His accusing gaze slid back to me. “But who knows. Maybe she lied about that.”

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, well. That’s not your problem.”

I saw Jake’s cheek flex before he offered a laugh. “Guess not.”

“I’d ask you for more details but you know,” Jackson smirked and nodded at me, “don’t want to offend Princess here. And you know, hot chicks hate hearing about other hot chicks.”

Anger flared in my nostrils as I cast Jackson a look. “That’s not true. I’m a grown woman so by all means,” I turned to Jake, “tell us all about the girl you met.”

Jake glared at me. I knew I was veering into dangerous territory but I was angry, resentful of the way he was looking at me. As if I were a monster. As if I were solely to blame for what happened between us. Oblivious, Jackson grinned.

“She’s pretending to be cool with it, so go for it before she changes her mind,” he said. “What’d this girl look like? Was she good?”

Jake laughed. I could see fury twitching in his lip, his nostrils, but he kept it well masked as he took a drink. “She was beautiful,” he finally said. “And she was easily the best I’ve ever had.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Jackson laughed. “Then she must’ve had the tightest pussy on planet Earth. I mean if she was the best out of *all* the women you’ve had in your life, then fuck, marry that girl and ask questions later.”

Jake looked at me. “Something tells me that wouldn’t be able to happen.”

At that point, I gripped the edge of the table. “Jackson – can you let me out?” I nodded out of the booth, losing my breath. I needed air, to be somewhere else. Jackson groaned, handing me my phone, which just happened to be ringing – Sloane.

“Sure, but try to cut her off after a few minutes. We have company, Lara.”

“I will,” I agreed hastily, taking my phone as I climbed out.

But outside the restaurant, leaning against the brick wall, I hit 'Ignore.' My throat had been closing since I spotted Jake. I was in no mood to talk to anyone. I had half a mind to hail the next cab I saw and go home. I couldn't handle another minute of this absolute nightmare.

"Tara."

I jumped when I heard Jake's voice next to me. My body stiffened when I turned to see him walking toward me in a simple white button-up and fitted jeans. I hated the fact that he looked so good. It made it hurt all the more as he stared at me with a look of contempt.

"Look, I wasn't the only one lying last night – *Max*. And what's this about you flying in just this morning?"

"Yes, I lied about when I got to New York. I needed a week to myself before all the madness started and as far as I know, my lie was nothing compared to yours."

"Look – I am *very* sorry that I put you in a terrible position by picking you of all people that night, but trust me, you don't know the half of what's going on between me and your brother right now so please, spare me of the judgment."

"I'm sorry, but that might be difficult considering you're fucking engaged," Jake hissed, closing the gap between us. "As in about to get married, so what the hell are you doing coming home with me? Do you have any idea how much Jackson loves you? I never met you before today but I can assure you, I've known every last detail about you since the day you met my brother at Sofie Winter's party. He talks about you constantly – he's fucking *crazy* about you."

My anger mounted. "You're right. He's so fucking crazy about me that he cheated on me with Sofie's nineteen-year-old daughter," I shot back, my lip curling with satisfaction as Jake literally backed down, his tight shoulders falling a couple inches. He stared at me.

"What?"

Before I could answer, the bow-tied host peeked his head out of the restaurant. The smile he directed at me faltered a bit when he spotted Jake at my side. "Oh. Um, Mr. Kinsley requested that I come out and find you, Miss Pierce. He said that your drinks are ready."

I managed a polite smile back, thanking him before he disappeared back into the restaurant. I walked ahead of Jake. "Don't come back at the same time."

“Hold on.” He started after me. “Jackson slept with Gabrielle Winter?”

I cut my eyes at Jake, grabbing the brass handle of the front door. “Yes. And in case you haven’t heard, she’s been missing for the past three months,” I muttered before returning inside.

Chapter Fifteen

I was beyond happy to leave Jackson alone with Jake after our lunch in SoHo. Through our faked pleasantries, I could see that Jake was dying to get me alone again – dying to hear more of what I'd told him outside. But all I wanted was to go home, crawl into bed and hug my pillow while contemplating whether or not to tell Sloane.

"That's fine, go home, babe. Jake and I have a lot of catching up to do. And we'll probably be out late," he squeezed my waist. "We haven't gone out together in ages."

I managed something of a smile. "You boys have fun then." As he whispered a sweet goodbye in my ear, I stared past his shoulder at Jake. He didn't glare anymore, or look at me with anger. His green eyes glinted, staring intently at me with a look I couldn't read. My lips parted as I gazed back, Jackson's hand all the while sliding down to my backside. I flinched, closing my eyes for the second that he gave my ass a firm squeeze.

When I opened them again, I saw Jake's lip curl before he turned on his heel to start walking away.

~

I still couldn't escape the thought of Jake when I got home, so in hopes of distracting myself, I invited the girls over for some wine and trashy reality TV. It was Sloane, Emily Rocha and her younger sister, Piper, best known in our circle for her racy underwear ads, which graced billboards in both SoHo and Times Square.

They were barely through the front door when the topic of Jake was brought up with squealing excitement.

"I heard the wild Kinsley is back in town!" Sloane said, setting a bottle of Amarone on the kitchen counter. I stiffened as I plated our paella but recovered quickly enough to cock my head curiously at her, a playful smile on my lips.

"Aren't you engaged?" I teased convincingly. "And what do you mean the 'wild' Kinsley?"

"Well, you know. He's the one who escaped the boys' crazy world and moved to a bunch of different tropical beaches to surf his sexy heart out. And yes, smarty-pants, I am engaged. But the key to a long-lasting

relationship is harmlessly flirting with other people! Just not sleeping with them."

"Yeah," I laughed nervously as I reached for the red wine. "So did you guys ever meet Jake?" I asked Emily and Piper. I knew Sloane never had – she had moved to New York two years before me but Jake was long gone by then.

Emily nodded vigorously as I opened the bottle. "By the time I met him, I was already with Erik, which was good because one look at that man and your brain just goes, 'Take me! Throw me over those man shoulders and take me however you want!'"

My laugh was real as Piper tossed her blonde hair back and snorted. "Em, you're not even drunk yet."

"What? He's hot. He's very different from our boys. He like… rejects the whole buttoned-up society thing. He used to always come to the galas with like messy hair and a full beard. One time, Jackson and Erik were bugging the hell out of him to come to one of Sofie's big parties, and he showed up in his gym clothes. Like, sweaty hair, white T-shirt and basketball shorts. I thought Sofie was going to have a heart attack but she was totally fine with it."

"Because they were thin basketball shorts and when he moved certain ways, you could see the outline of his dick," Piper said.

"*Piper!*" Emily scolded. "I wasn't going to tell that part of the story." She took a big gulp of wine. "Just kidding, I totally was. But I was going to wait till Lady Prim and Proper got drunk so she wouldn't mind the inappropriate language."

"Give me some time, I'm getting there," Sloane sipped her drink like a lady.

I giggled, working on my own glass of wine as I listened to my friends banter. Talking about Jake with the girls was less painful than I imagined, perhaps because their boozy gossiping made it feel like any other girls' night. Emily and Sloane went back and forth for several minutes before Piper, finishing her drink, interrupted abruptly.

"So, this Jake – is he single?" she inquired, cocking a dark blonde eyebrow.

"Girl, he's only ever single," Emily answered.

"Man-slut?" Piper asked.

“Work addict,” Emily corrected before turning to me. “I heard the boys hired him as the architect for the new restaurant in the Monarch hotel. Isn’t that why he’s in town?” she asked.

I blinked. “Yes. Something like that,” I said, though I hadn’t known this at all. But it did make sense. Jake was an architect and the hotel’s opening had been delayed several months because they couldn’t find the right person to build its restaurant. Apparently now, that person was Jake. “I guess that means he’ll be in the city for longer than just a visit,” I realized aloud.

“Oh, that’s perfect! We should definitely have him come to Labor Day weekend. Piper’s been *desperate* to find a new boyfriend!” Emily squealed. Piper rolled her eyes like a teenager.

“I’m not desperate. Just horny as fuck.” She flicked her eyes at Sloane and smirked. “Sorry for the language.”

Sloane laughed it off nervously, but her telltale lash flutter meant that she was rustled. Emily clapped loudly.

“Well, that settles it. We need to invite Jake to our next event,” she declared. “Oh! Lara, darling, I didn’t even ask you. How did he look today at lunch? Beautiful?”

All three girls stared at me, waiting for an answer. I swallowed, trying to find a mild way to describe him. “He’s a good-looking guy,” I finally shrugged with a laugh. “Tall, tanned. Muscles. Any woman would go for him.”

Piper slid her empty glass over for me to refill. “What about you?” she lifted a skinny eyebrow. I managed a smile, silently jeering myself for what I was about to say.

“Oh, I don’t count. He’s my fiancé’s brother,” I said.

Chapter Sixteen

I awoke that night to the sound of glass shattering in the kitchen.

I jolted up in bed, instantly breaking into a cold sweat. My arm reached to wake Jackson but all I got was a handful of cold sheets on his side of the mattress. *Shit.* My eyes darted to the clock on his nightstand. Two-fifteen in the morning and I was home alone, an unidentified noise flashing me back to the night I'd come back from Sofie's party to find a strange man in my room. After all, the police had never found him. Perhaps he was back for more – back to make sure I didn't remember what he looked like. *Please, please, please,* I prayed as I slipped out the bed, hoping to God that I had just imagined the sound. I was looking around my room for a heavy object when I heard a drunk, gravelly voice.

"Fuck, that's gonna hurt tomorrow."

My jaw clenched.

Jackson. My fingers balled into fists at my sides as I abandoned my search for a weapon and stormed downstairs, ready to snap at him for scaring the shit out of me. Our home had been broken into just eight weeks ago. My heart still wasn't ready for other bumps in the night. My pulse racing, I rushed into the kitchen.

"*Jackson*. What the hell just hap – "

I stopped midsentence when instead of Jackson, I saw Jake standing there, leaning casually against the counter. He wore the same white shirt as before but now it was half unbuttoned, a hard line of muscle peeking out. I froze, unblinking as I watched his glassy eyes slide down from my face to my body. Only then did I realize I was wearing my sheer nightgown – a flimsy, black thing that ended just below my crotch. Clearly drunk, Jake let himself stare at me for several silent seconds. "God fucking help me," he finally muttered, laughing bitterly to himself.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and keeping my distance. He laughed but before he could say a word, Jackson stumbled out of the bathroom.

"Babe! You're up!" he cheered jovially. I realized then that he was somewhere between hammered and blackout drunk because under normal circumstances, he'd put on a face a shame and show some kind of respect for my wrath. Instead, he held out his arms for me to walk into, completely

oblivious to my mood. “Get the fuck over here, sexy. Whoa, hey, wait. Jake’s here,” he said as if that weren’t totally obvious. “You can’t walk around like that.”

I stared, in disbelief of the situation. “Or I’ll just go back to bed. Just make sure you don’t break any more glasses.”

“No, come here and have a nightcap with us, babe.”

“I don’t think you need a nightcap, Jackson,” I said. As he bent over to pick up a shard of glass from the floor, I let my eyes snap back at Jake. He seemed to detect it because his gaze returned leisurely from my body to my face. I knew I was visibly fuming and it only got worse when he dared to crack a dirty little smile. *What the fuck.*

“I’m going upstairs, Jackson.”

“Babe, wait.”

I turned back around as Jackson wobbled on his feet.

“Jake needs something to sleep in, can you get him one of my T-shirts?”

I stared at Jackson for a hard second before turning back around. “Fine.”

I was barely up the stairs when I heard Jackson plod over to the sitting room, throw his body onto the couch and pass out. Within seconds, he was snoring the way he only did when completely obliterated. I paused in the hall, listening for Jake. My stomach twisted ten seconds later when I heard his footsteps coming up the stairs.

Hastily, I made my way down the hall. But I heard Jake’s voice before I made it to the bedroom.

“Lara.”

I turned rigidly, trying not to visibly tremble as I watched him come toward me, his stride steady, strong despite his drunkenness. My eyes fluttered to disguise the fact that they’d traveled briefly down to the front of his shirt, its cotton straining to fit across his muscled chest.

“I’m going to get you some clothes,” I murmured when he reached me, nervous and unsure of what to say. His gaze floated down to my hair, which I’d fanned over my breasts. “Don’t,” I murmured warningly.

He brought his reluctant eyes back to me, running a heavy hand over his jaw. “Trust me. I don’t want to find you this fucking irresistible.”

“Jake – ”

“I know,” he interrupted me with frustration. “I need to stop. You’re going to be my brother’s wife. I can’t think about you or look at you or want you. I know all of that.”

His words hung in the air as I swallowed. “Yes,” I finally said. “I’m glad you know. Let me get you pajamas so you can get to bed. The guest room is down the hall from the kitchen.”

I disappeared into the bedroom and thanked God that Jake didn’t follow. But when I returned, he still stood there in the hall, thick lust visible in his green eyes. I looked down. My hair had shifted out of place from sifting through Jackson’s closet. Cursing, I moved to cover my breasts again but the ends of Jake’s lips twisted upward.

“Nothing I haven’t already seen. Or touched.”

“We’re not going to talk about that night again, Jake. In fact, we shouldn’t even think about it.”

“I’d love that but every time I pass the stairs in my apartment, I think about all the sounds that came out of your mouth when I made you come. The first time and the second time.”

My heart pounded like a hammer. “Jake, why are you doing this?” I demanded. “Are you *okay* with all of this? The fact that you *fucked* your brother’s *fiancée?*”

His eyes went steely. “No. I’m not okay with anything, Lara. I don’t know how to take any of the news that you told me today, especially since Jackson hasn’t said a word to match your story,” Jake answered through gritted teeth. “I have no clue what to think and it’s driving me fucking crazy because all I do know is that we had sex before I knew who you were and now I can’t stop fucking thinking about it. I can’t stop wishing to touch your body. I can’t stop wishing to be buried inside you again because you felt fucking unreal. I’ve been trying to erase the thought of you from my head but I can’t. You’re the most perfect thing I’ve ever laid eyes on. And I figured, shit, it was for the best when I woke up the next morning and you were gone. I thought I could stop this infatuation before it grew into something that would take over my mind but I can’t even do that now because here you are. Engaged to my brother.” The hollow of his cheek twitched as his jaw tightened. “I’m always going to hear about you. I’m always going to see you. And every time I see you, I’m going to have to remind myself that I can’t look at you or touch you the way I did last night and I know it’s going to drive me fucking insane.”

His words had me reeling and I told myself it wasn't because I felt anything similar. "Jake," I started, my breath so shaky that my teeth chattered. "Look… you're drunk right now – "

"Stop."

"You're not thinking straight, you're – "

"I know exactly what the fuck I'm thinking, Lara. I'm a grown man. I know when I've had something different. Something I've never had before. And I know from the look on your face that you feel the same way too, so don't stand here and try to – "

"Please – *what* do you think you know about me?" I challenged angrily. "What do you think it is that I felt that night?"

"Something more than just two strangers fucking on the floor," Jake hissed at me. "I dreamt of you the whole night and thought of you the second I woke up, Lara. Look me in the eye and tell me it wasn't the same for you."

"It wasn't," I lied.

He shook his head at me, somehow knowing better. "I made you feel better than anything you've ever felt in your life."

That's not true, I told myself. *That's not true, that's not true. That's just not true.* If I repeated it enough, I might believe it. Speechless, my chest heaved. "I'll show you to the guest room," I finally said, hoping we could somehow drop the entire conversation. Walking past him and down the stairs, I heard him follow, quiet until we were past Jackson, past the kitchen and headed down the hall.

"Tell me it felt different, Lara."

I ignored him, my throat tightening. Once I was inside the guest room, I bee-lined for the bed, slamming Jake's change of clothes onto the end of the mattress. I wanted to spin around and snap something at him. I wanted to shove him and tell him never to mention the other night again.

But instead I held my breath, sensing him standing right behind mine. The heat of his chest was on my back. I cursed my body as I felt something ripple up the back of my thighs. Anticipation. I had felt the same thing last night going up the stairs – before he'd grabbed me and thrust his hands between my thighs, letting me rub myself against him.

"Jake," I breathed a warning when I felt his hands on my waist. But he ignored it. He buried his face in the curve of my neck, desire rumbling from his chest as he pressed his torso against my back. I gasped when I felt

his erection jump between our bodies, my fingers curling with lust into Jackson's T-shirt and shorts. *Don't*, I told myself. But the only thoughts circling my head were about feeling Jake inside me again.

And without thinking, I bent over. Right away, Jake thrust his hips against me, rubbing his hard cock against my ass. I closed my eyes and rolled my head back, dizzy with arousal as I heard him grunt. Biting my lip, I bent further until his erection pressed flat against my pussy. "Oh God," I breathed, grinding against him, ripples of pleasure shooting through my body. My sex throbbed so hard against him that I knew he could feel it through his jeans because he groaned, louder and louder until he suddenly ripped his body away from me.

"Fuck!" he growled, thrusting his fingers through his hair.

"*Sh!*" I hissed desperately, panicked as I waited for Jackson to stir. But in the sudden quiet of the room, I could still make out the sound of his snoring. I stared frantically at Jake, waiting for him to say something, waiting for eye contact so I could apologize for what I'd just done. What was I thinking? We weren't supposed to look at or touch each other in that way again. Ever.

But instead of meeting my gaze, Jake cursed and tore off his shirt. He didn't so much as glance my way before pushing through the bathroom door.

Upstairs in my room, after my pulse returned to normal, I lay alone in bed. Rubbing over my panties, I closed my eyes, hating myself as I imagined Jake in the shower, the lined muscles in his forearms twitching as he jerked off the hot, pulsing erection I'd given him.

Chapter Seventeen

“I’m getting the feeling you don’t like this one very much.” The calligrapher recommended to me by Sofie Winter put away the beautiful, matte wedding invitation in her hands, plucking another with her perfectly manicured fingers.

“No, I do,” I insisted, flustered. “It’s beautiful. I’m sorry if I looked distracted.”

“It’s okay,” she gave me a knowing smile. “Your mind’s just everywhere, isn’t it? You know mommy brain? Well there’s bride brain, too, sweetie, and I think you have it,” she giggled. “Just means you’ve got too many things going on with the planning and while you’re at the florist’s, you’re thinking about the dress, and while you’re at the fitting, you’re thinking about catering. It’s totally natural.”

It probably was but I didn’t have bride brain on this particular morning in Gramercy Park. I had a fiancé who refused to have sex with me.

That morning, Jackson had joined me in the shower. He’d opened the door, letting me rinse the shampoo from my hair as I watched him peel his dirty clothes off. “I’m sorry for last night,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my lips when he got in. “I don’t remember it that well but I know you had to be pretty rightfully pissed.”

Feeling guilty myself, I had easily accepted his apology and lathered him up with soap, running my hands down his sides and forcing his arms up. He held them folded behind his head, watching with a lazy grin as I lowered myself to my knees, my palms sliding down to his thighs. I rubbed a slow, gentle massage onto his legs, feeling his muscles twitch as I let my warm breath tease his hardening cock.

But the second I brushed my lips against his helmet, he winced. “Lara,” he stepped back. “No.”

I blinked at him with utter confusion. He’d never declined sex once in our four years together. I frowned hard. “What?”

“I can’t. Not till you’re done with what you have to do. I just… can’t.”

“Are you serious? Jackson, please, let’s just forget that. It doesn’t have to be three times. I did it once and that was enough.”

Jackson rested his forehead against mine. “You say that now but you don’t realize how much it fucking hurts when you throw what I did back at me.”

I pulled away, eyes wide with surprise. “Jackson, I know hurt.”

“This is what I mean. That’s you throwing it back at me.”

“What, I’m supposed to pretend this *never happened?*” The hot water beat down on me as I stared incredulously.

“I want us to do something as close as possible to that, Lara, yes. Is that crazy? I want us to forget what happened and leave it all behind and if it takes you fucking whoever it was two more times, then fine. If that’s the price I have to pay until you understand that what I did meant *nothing*, and that I’ll always love you, then great. Perfect. I’ll pay that price.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. I was being told by my fiancé to sleep with someone else, twice more, before *he* would have sex with me again. I was so astonished I couldn’t speak, wordlessly moving aside for him as he stepped under the shower, letting the water rain down his wide shoulders. I could tell that he was annoyed with my stunned silence but I couldn’t think of anything to say.

He was the one who eventually ended the quiet, turning off the showerhead and pushing open the door. “Just make sure it’s the same fucking guy. I’d rather you keep it to a minimum,” he muttered before getting out.

His words echoed in my head as the calligrapher turned to me with a sympathetic look. “Why don’t we reschedule for another time, sweetheart? Maybe you should use the rest of the day to relax – go to the spa, get a massage, turn off your phone. You know.”

I cocked my head as she glanced down at my phone. The large screen was packed full with notifications – missed calls and text messages from mostly Sloane and the girls. I blinked back up at her. “Was that ringing the whole time?”

“It was.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t even notice.”

“Bride brain.”

Sure. “Yes. Right. Let’s reschedule then. I’m so sorry if I wasted your time today.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. You’re a bride and you’re having your wedding in New York. If you think it’s crazy now, just wait till you get closer to the

day. The madness just doesn't stop!"

As I left the boutique, I prayed that she was wrong about that. I needed the madness to stop. I needed to just tell Jackson that I'd gotten the deal over with and that we could just be us again. Because sleeping with Jake for a second time would be dangerous. I knew this and I was fiercely determined not to let it happen again. I needed to wane myself off of him. I needed to find a way to nix my attraction.

Or at the very least, bring it down enough that I would never again touch myself to the thought of him, all the while laying in his brother's bed.

Chapter Eighteen

On Friday, Jackson invited all our friends to Buccieri for an extravagant celebration of Jake's return. I bought a special dress for the occasion – something I knew that Jackson wouldn't be able to resist. I needed him back tonight, to quell the desperation that had been pulsing between my legs for days. I needed to feel his weight on top of me again. Most of all, I needed to remember him and forget Jake.

So I wore an ultra-short lace number – skintight, strapless and just a half-shade lighter than the color of my skin. I looked naked and I knew it was racy. But racy was what I needed. Not only would it stun Jackson, it would command the eyes of his friends. I knew my fiancé – half his arousal came from the fact that he was envied, that he had what others wanted. It was strange, borderline fucked up, but it was something I accepted by now.

And tonight, it was something I could use to my advantage.

"Oh. My. God." Sloane dropped her studded clutch when the elevator door opened for her to step into my apartment. I had told Jackson to go first and make sure everything looked right, and that I'd meet him later with Sloane. In reality, I just wanted to make a grand entrance. I tried not to think about the fact that I was doing it at Jake's welcome back party.

"Yeah…" I grinned excitedly as Sloane eyed me from head to toe, her heels clicking toward me slowly as she pretended to be floored. Or maybe she wasn't pretending.

"Lara, what the hell! You look like you should be on the cover of Maxim!" she's squealed. "You do realize you look way too sexy right now, right? Can we like, oil up your skin and give you sex hair?"

I burst out laughing. "Sloane, no." I touched my ballerina topknot. "I need to keep my hair classy to offset the total vamp dress."

"Yes, true. Good thinking. So what shoes are you wearing?" she asked curiously, her lake blue eyes widening. When I broke into a devilish grin, her jaw dropped and she bounced on her toes giddily. "Oh my god. You're going to bust out the magic shoes."

She was right. The magic shoes were black, suede thigh-high boots with a six-inch wedge heel. They hugged my legs and reached well above the middle of my thigh. I had bought them with Sloane last year in Paris,

while we were shopping for Valentine's Day lingerie. I'd worn them that night in our suite, with strappy black lingerie and garters. I'd sauntered down the stairs to surprise Jackson as he sat on the couch. He was in a lazy, post-dinner content but he shot straight up the second he saw me, studying my body in awe for a minute, as if regarding a rare piece of artwork at the Louvre. But then he grabbed me tight, kissing my neck as he carried me to the floor-to-ceiling window. "You're so fucking sexy," he rasped in my ear as he unzipped his pants and freed his cock. "I have to show you off, baby. I fucking have to."

And so he did, thrusting my half-naked body against a window overlooking the sidewalk. I would never do it again in my life, but it was easily the hottest, most exhilarating sex I'd ever had.

Since that night, the boots had gone unworn. It wasn't because I was saving them for another special occasion though – it was mostly because they were so long that I didn't own anything short enough to show them off. They started five inches below my crotch and most of my dresses ended there.

But not the one I was set to wear tonight.

Sloane gasped for a full ten seconds when I finally brought out the boots. A rush of excitement prickled my skin as I pulled the zipper smoothly up from the arch of my foot to the upper middle of my inner thigh. When I stood up straight to gaze into the mirror, I had to laugh with Sloane at the ridiculous amount of sex the ensemble oozed. There were barely three inches of exposed skin on my legs. From afar, it looked like I was wearing only a pair of boots.

Sloane shook her head. "You two are going to have sex at the party, aren't you?"

My lips twisted into a grin as I grabbed my clutch. "That's the plan."

Chapter Nineteen

Buccieri's second floor lounge was a cozy little spot with candlelit tables, leather booths and tufted walls. There was something undeniably sultry about the room and I always loved sitting there, sipping champagne cocktails and luxuriating in the sounds of my favorite songs by Nina Simone. They drifted through the air as I laughed with Sloane and occasionally caught Jackson's eye from across the room, where he and the boys discussed whatever it was that they discussed.

I couldn't wait to do exactly that tonight – give Jackson bedroom eyes from afar, cross and uncross my legs, do all the things that always forced him to excuse himself from his friends and take me elsewhere for a private moment.

But I didn't spot him right away when I got to the second floor.

"Fuckin' fuck," Sawyer groaned when he saw me first. He thrust his fingers into his coiffed hair, ruining it. "Lara. Babe. *Fuck*," he said as if it were a real sentence. He was speechless as I kissed his cheek and stood there as more of Jackson and my friends came to greet me.

"Oh my *God*, Lara," Emily Rocha gasped, gesturing at my dress before giggling and whispering in my ear. "Piper's putting the moves on Jake right now and he's totally not into it. It's hilarious! Come say hi with me so you can see."

Before I could say no, she dragged my arm, pulling me to the circle booth at the very back of the room. There, I saw Piper kneeling in her leather mini dress, two teasing fingertips trailing up to Jake's package as she whispered in his ear. He stared ahead, a lowball of scotch in his left hand and a sexy, crooked laugh on his lips. "Not into it" didn't seem like the most accurate description.

Still, Emily tossed me a "*how funny!*" look before clearing her throat. "Excuse us, Piper. The man of the hour needs to say hello to his future sister-in-law."

Act normal, I braced myself.

But the second Jake looked at me, the room stood still. The laughter and music floated from my ears and all I could hear was my own pulse as he stared at me with a lust so instant I feared Emily and Piper would know

– that the air would give us away, growing instantly thick with the energy of two people who weren't supposed to have had sex.

But their banter was what brought me back to Earth. "Couldn't you see that we were *talk*ing?" Piper asked Emily, who shot back with something I didn't hear because Jake was standing up.

"Always good to see you, Lara." His voice was convincingly casual. My body was hot as he leaned forward, one hand on my waist as he kissed my cheek. "You look beautiful as always," he said, his eyes boring into mine.

"Thank you," I murmured as I took in the sight of his athletic body in formalwear. He looked torturously good in a dark grey button up and black skinny tie – like he belonged on the red carpet. "You look very handsome yourself," I offered quietly, a shiver rippling up the length of my spine as Jake leaned back on his heels, still taking me in. He'd yet to take his emerald eyes off of me. But then again, I couldn't stop staring at him either. The air was thick. Tense.

But to my surprise, we cracked a smile at the same time.

Thank you, Rocha sisters. They were still bickering ridiculously but I was grateful for the comic relief. I hadn't spoken to Jake since a couple nights ago, when we'd done whatever it was we'd done in the guest bedroom. I hadn't been sure of how he'd act around me tonight but thus far, things were looking amicable at the very least.

"Nice boots," he gave me a small but dimpled smile. Taking a step back, he eyed my outfit, his stare so intense that I swore it could peel off my dress and panties right there. "Has Jackson seen you yet?" he asked, shaking his head a little. I wasn't sure what that meant but even the way he did that was sexy.

"Oh God!" Emily gasped suddenly. "*Lara.* Has your man not seen you in this outfit yet? Let's go find him! I have to see his reaction!"

"Perfect. Go do that while we continue the conversation you so rudely interrupted," Piper drawled, tugging on Jake's hand.

"Forgive me, I'm actually going to go say hi to my brother," Jake said smoothly to her glossy, pouted lips. "I've barely seen him since coming in."

I cocked my head at Jake as he headed away with me. Just in time, Emily's boyfriend came to whisk her away, giving me a second alone with him. "What's Jackson been doing?" I asked curiously, having expected that

he'd be at Jake's side the whole night. My heart beat fast as I watched Jake's lips purse into a straight line.

"That's what I wanted to warn you about."

My heart fell into my stomach. *What? Was it something about Gabrielle? The Winters?*

"I'm sorry – I don't know how, but my stepsister found out about the party and she's here tonight," Jake revealed to my surprise.

"Oh." My eyes fluttered, unsure of what this news even meant. "I… thought she lived in Los Angeles?"

"She does. But Jackson and I had dinner with my mom a few days ago and I have a feeling she told Audra about tonight."

A million different questions swirled through my head. *Your mom and Audra still talk? Is Audra better now? She was in rehab at some point, right? What exactly happened between you two?* But I didn't know which question to ask first and I was fairly certain that half of them were beyond rude. So I didn't give away the fact that I knew nothing about the mysterious Audra as Jake led me up the last flight of stairs in Buccieri, to the private little mezzanine that was big enough for just one table.

My eyebrows jumped halfway to my hairline when I reached that very table.

Sitting there was Jackson, joined by a slender but unbelievably buxom girl with eyes so light I could hardly see anything but pupil. I was so startled by her appearance that it took me a second to notice her tanned leg entwined with Jackson's, her heeled foot rubbing the side of his ankle.

"Audra," Jake's firm voice broke her away from him.

What. The fuck. I stared at Jackson, waiting for him to notice me.

"Babe," his eyes widened when he spotted me. Unblinking, he rose to his feet, gravitating straight to me as if I possessed some magnetic pull. "Holy fuckin' shit, babe," he breathed, looking down at my body. His eyes gleamed when he looked back up at me, as if he'd just won the jackpot at a casino. "I remember these boots," he grinned, running his hands from my waist to my back, then down to my ass. As he grabbed two handfuls, I could see Jake look away.

Irritated, I removed Jackson's hands from me. "Jackson, aren't you going to introduce me to your stepsister?" I asked, trying to stress the word "*sister*." Jackson blinked.

“Uh, yeah. Of course,” he answered hastily, as if he’d completely forgotten that she was there. When he stepped aside, she gave me a wry smile and wiggled a few bejeweled fingers at me. I guessed that it was her version of waving. “Audra, this is Lara,” Jackson said. “My fiancée.”

“Nice to meet you. Audra,” Audra said before whipping out her cell phone and going straight back to her drink. Apparently, that was it for introductions. I flashed a look at Jackson. He was unfazed so I turned to Jake, who shared in my confusion. Glaring at Audra, his jaw flexed.

“That it?” he asked.

She peered up from her phone and simpered at him. No reply. With that, I took Jackson’s hand. “Can I speak to you for a second?”

He blinked at me. “Sure. Jake, can you take Audra downstairs?”

I watched Audra resist for a second before smirking and following Jake down the stairs. Once they were gone, I tilted my head slowly at Jackson. “What was that just now?”

“What was what? Lara, Christ, this dress – ”

“We’re not talking about my dress right now,” I snapped. “I just walked up here to find you playing footsies with your *stepsister*, who, by the way, I’ve never met once before in our four years together. I wasn’t even under the impression that you were on good terms with her but now she springs up out of nowhere, we barely get introduced and you’re acting like it’s not strange that she was all over you.”

“What? Christ, Lara, she was hardly all over – ”

“She had a leg crossed around yours and was rubbing your ankle with her foot, Jackson. Would you like to see me do that with Sawyer?”

His eyes hardened. “What, you want to play footsies with Sawyer?”

“*No*, I’m giving you an example of how pissed you’d be if I did. I mean all I did was suggest it just now and you’re already upset, so imagine how I feel. I’ve spent years never asking about Audra because you acted like she was such a sore subject and now I see you practically flirting with her. What the hell is going on?” I demanded.

Jackson rolled his head back and looked up at the ceiling with a bitter laugh. “My God. You have got to be kidding me, Lara. You’re jealous of my stepsister right now?”

“*Jealous* is not the word, Jackson, I’m *confused* and to be honest, a little disturbed by the way you two were – ”

“Babe, I’m not fucking doing this tonight. I’m here to have fun and celebrate the fact that Jake is back. We’re not talking about this now and you know what, we’re not going to talk about it ever again because once you take a minute to breathe, you’ll realize that you’re accusing me of something completely ridiculous. So I’m done. And I sincerely hope that you are too.”

With that, Jackson slammed the rest of his drink and went back downstairs. Fuming, I leaned over the balcony and watched him go. *Breathe,* I told myself, considering for a second that I’d overreacted.

But then I saw Audra spot Jackson. Breaking away from Piper and a couple others, she sauntered over and hugged him under his suit jacket, pressing her enormous chest against him and whispering something in his ear. My heart pounded when Jackson glanced up at me, meeting my eye before whispering something in Audra’s ear and removing her arms from his waist.

Chapter Twenty

Downstairs, at the end of a quiet hallway, I found a powder room to hide in as I let my tears fall. I was heated, in no mood to cry, but my body was forcing me to do it and I opted to take that as a sign. Something was wrong. Jackson could deny it all he wanted but I had definitely seen something unusual between him and his stepsister. And it was infuriating me. What more was I going to find out about him? I would've never imagined that after Gabrielle Winter, he'd give me more to worry about. He had given me his word that he'd never mess up again. Yet here we were: one missing mistress now joined by an inappropriately sexual stepsister.

Pushing my way out the bathroom door, I wondered what the hell to expect next. And instantly, I got my answer.

Leaning against the wall in front of me was Jake, tugging on the end of his tie until he saw me. "Lara. I'm sorry," he said right away.

"Jackson's the one who should be sorry," I corrected bitterly. "Not you."

"I know, but I'm pretty fucking pissed at him too. I thought when I came here that things would be different but he's just been…" Jake trailed off. The other half of his sentence was gone before I could ask him to finish. Sucking in a sharp breath, he leaned his head back against the wall. It was silent for a second. Gazing down at me, I could see Jake's fiery eyes begin to calm. I bit my lip as they began wandering about my body again. He shook his head, a faint grin touching the corner of his lips. "This a cruel outfit to be wearing to my party," he finally said. I smiled despite my mood.

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Spell it out for me."

He laughed. "You look naked and it's making every man in this building fantasize about seeing you with just those boots on."

A wicked excitement crawled through me. "And that includes you, right?"

"Oh, I'm fantasizing far beyond that."

Mm. I was heated a second ago, now I was hot. I liked that feeling much better. Wrestling the glass of scotch from Jake's hand, I brought it to my lips and sipped. "You've seen me completely naked before. What's the thrill in seeing me naked in boots?"

"I have no idea, Lara. I just know that I want it."

With a smirk, I nodded, all the while thinking about how Jackson had demanded that I finish our deal – that I sleep with my own fling twice more before calling it a wrap. Maybe I'd do that after all. Handing the empty glass back to Jake, I removed the pins from my topknot. I could feel his stare as lock by lock, it tumbled down, my hair even wavier, wilder than usual. "Well. I can give you what you want if you give me something in exchange," I murmured, lifting my gaze from my hairpins to his face of surprise.

"You – what?"

"If you answer a question for me, I'll find us a private little spot where you can see me wearing these boots. And only these boots."

Jake stared in surprise. He wet his lower lip, feasting his eyes on the body I'd just promised him. But he quickly shook himself out of his lusty haze. "Lara – as much as I fucking hate a lot of my brother's decisions, I know we really shouldn't be – "

"He told me to."

Jake blinked. "What?"

"He told me to sleep with someone to make it even. Three times because he slept with Gabrielle three times," I explained in a hush. "That was why I was at that bar in Brooklyn that night. That night I found you." I bit my lip, watching Jake, waiting for him to be swayed. When it took longer than I expected, I widened my stance, crossing my arms and standing with my legs apart. Jake's eyes followed my dress as it rode slowly up my thighs. He wiped at his lips, muffling a groan as his gaze traveled up the front of my dress and to my cleavage, which I pushed out as I crossed my arms.

"Fuck." His jaw tightened as he looked into my eyes. "What's your question?"

"I want you to tell me everything you know about Audra."

Jake closed his eyes. "Lara. It's not my place to tell you this. It's up to Jack – "

“It’s been four years and he hasn’t said a word. I deserve to know so please, Jake, tell me what happened between you two.”

He squinted. “Between *me* and Audra?”

“Jackson said you two had a bad relationship from the start and he always implied that something happened between you two that was the last straw.”

Jake’s expression turned to stone. “It was the last straw but it happened between Audra and Jackson. Not Audra and myself.”

Why was I even surprised? Playing tough, I braced myself. “Tell me, Jake.”

“Lara, you need to know that this was complicated and there were a thousand incidents that led up to this but – ”

“Tell me what happened, Jake.”

“He slept with her.”

My heart slammed itself against my ribs. I closed my eyes, only just realizing that I’d suspected this the second I’d laid eyes on them upstairs.

“But that was almost ten years ago and she moved to LA shortly after, so it couldn’t have gone on for long. He was twenty-five, she was twenty-three.”

“How long at that point had she been a part of your family?” I barely wanted to ask. I’d still be disturbed if they’d slept together the night of their parents’ wedding. Jake turned his gaze to the side as he answered.

“Three years.”

My stomach turned. “How often did Jackson see her after that? She had to have visited New York.”

“I don’t know. I moved to Australia a year after college and I only came back to New York five years ago, when my mom got heart surgery. I left again shortly after and Jackson never brought her up when he visited me.”

“Yeah, well, from what I’ve learned, Jackson doesn’t bring up a lot of his extracurricular activities.” Crossing my arms tighter, I stared at the wall beside Jake, trying to talk myself down. Audra wasn’t related to Jackson and they’d already been living separate lives when their fling began nearly a decade ago. I couldn’t hold that against him. Unless he was still sleeping with her. *No. He couldn’t possibly be that stupid*. But he was certainly stupid enough to let her drape herself all over his body and wrap her arms around him in a way that only I should. I chewed my lip, feeling my cheeks

get hot again. Peering up from under my lashes, I cast Jake a look. “Thank you for answering.”

He paused, as if suddenly remembering that we’d struck a deal. “Lara… I would’ve told you regardless. You’re right. You should get to know a lot of what Jackson doesn’t tell you. You deserve that much for being so good to him.”

Too good to him, my lip curled. I smirked at Jake. “Are you trying to back out of my end of the deal now?”

The way he bit his lip was irresistible. “I’m trying to talk myself out of something I know I won’t feel right about later. But it’s not going great.”

“Good.” I nodded at the powder room door. “Then let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-One

With the door behind us, I turned around, hot anticipation bursting through me as I presented Jake with the back of my dress. The second I felt his touch, my breath went jagged, my breasts heaving under the confines of my skintight bodice. My dress felt too tight and I thanked God for Jake as I studied him in the mirror, his sleeve tightening around his strong bicep as he unzipped me all the way down.

The smallest moan escaped my lips when I felt the cold air hit my skin. Jake groaned at the sound, falling into me, burying his face into the side of my neck and kissing down its curve. I reveled for a minute in the sensation of his tongue on my hot skin. But then I ripped my body away.

I let go of the front of my dress as I walked away from him, listening to his audible arousal as I tugged it down. I licked my lips, making out the sound of Jake rubbing his cock over his pants as I let the dress fall in a puddle around my heeled feet. Stepping out, I turned around, facing Jake in just a black thong and thigh high boots.

"*Fuck*," he hissed, grabbing the edge of the marble vanity. I bit my swelling lower lip, my naked chest rising and falling as I restrained myself. All I wanted was for Jake to touch me. But at the same time, I wanted to see how long he could wait before his hands could no longer resist. So I simply stood before him, watching his green eyes flash with an unbridled awe that made me feel the sexiest I'd ever felt in my life. "You're fucking perfect," he breathed out, looking pained as he feasted his eyes on my naked breasts, my stomach. Between my thighs. "I'd give fucking anything for this to be what I woke up to every morning," he murmured as I turned toward my reflection, gathering my wild hair around my shoulder. He watched with content for a minute before coming up behind me. My breath hitched in my throat when he hooked his fingers into my thong. He tugged the slightest bit, so that the lace rubbed against my clit. And suddenly, my control was gone.

Spinning around, I gripped his tie and pulled his lips to mine. His kiss was instantly hard and hungry.

"Jake," I moaned, my pussy throbbing as his hands gripped my ass and squeezed. Taking his wrist, I slid his hand down the flimsy front of my

thong. To my delight, his fingers immediately pleasured me, his jaw dropping as he felt the incredible slickness between my lips.

"Fuck, I want you so bad. You have no idea how fucking bad I wish you were mine."

I squeezed my eyes shut and exhaled. "Then fuck me now."

He groaned something unintelligible. "I don't have a condom."

Fuck. I dug my nails into his chest. I could feel the heat of his full erection between our bodies and I wanted nothing more but to feel it inside me. I had to. So gripping his belt, I tugged. Angrily, I began to undo it.

"Lara… I don't – "

His mouth snapped shut when I lowered myself to my knees. In no time, I had my hand wrapped around his cock, his shaft pushing between my swollen lips.

"*Fuck*, Lara." His deep grunts sent pangs of pleasure between my thighs. As if reading my mind, Jake squeezed a handful of my hair. "Touch yourself." The sound of his low growl hypnotized me. Right away, I circled my finger around my clit, satisfying myself as I did the same to him. I hummed against him, my mouth stretching around his thickness. I could hear the sound of his guttural appreciation with every tight, wet pull and it only made me want to suck him harder. Parting my lips wider, I let him rock into me, gripping his flexing thigh muscles as I took every last inch. His helmet pulsing hot against the back of my throat, I could feel him nearing the edge.

He didn't have to tell me that he was going to come.

I pulled him out with a naughty *pop* just in time, pointing his cock at my body and letting him finish with a roar onto my breasts. He gnashed his teeth, his awed eyes unblinking as he watched the endless streams fall onto me, one by one.

Our lips were still locked as he cleaned and zipped me up.

Back at the party, while chatting with Sawyer and Sloane, I could still feel a drop of Jake under my dress, in my skin. Silently, I savored it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning, I woke up a guilty mess.

It didn't help that I had spent the night once again dreaming about Jake. Sitting up in bed, I felt short of breath, immediately suffocated by the memory of last night. *Angry. Vengeful. Bitter*. Those were the words I

used to shame myself. But at the back of my head, I wondered if they were totally accurate – if I'd done what I'd solely to get back at Jackson, or if his lies had just been my excuse to feel Jake inside of me again.

Because I couldn't deny it anymore. I wanted him. I thought about him when I wasn't supposed to think about him. I touched myself and imagined my fingers were his.

Jackson's plan had officially gone awry. I was supposed to sleep with a random person to know the feeling of a meaningless affair. But instead, I'd slept with a man who made me want more – who made my body ache for him more than I ached for my fiancé. And to top it all off, he was my fiancé's brother

This has to stop, I told myself, resolving to make this day about straightening things out with Jackson. We'd hash things out about our fight over Audra, I'd tell him that I'd finished our deal and we'd go back to being us, to being the same, perfect Jackson and Lara that once existed.

Unfortunately, Jackson spent the entire day out. When I texted him, he claimed to be in important meetings. At night, when I couldn't reach him and texted Caleb, Caleb told me that they were all out having drinks.

And so I went to bed, determined to talk to Jackson when he got back.

But the next morning, I found him passed out with Caleb and Sawyer on our couches downstairs, all three of them still wearing the shirts and pants they'd gone out drinking in. That entire Sunday was spent nursing all three of their hangovers. When I brought Sawyer his 2PM breakfast, he kissed my cheek and asked Jackson if he knew how "fuckin' lucky" he was to be marrying me.

"Very lucky," Jackson said distractedly as he read a text on his phone. I glared at him so hard that I knew poor Sawyer could feel the tension because he randomly excused himself to make a call. But even with him gone, Jackson didn't bother looking my way. He didn't care to. He knew I was there but he kept his eyes glued on his phone, blissfully ignoring the fact that I was livid to the point of leaving.

Because I simply couldn't understand it.

He'd done nothing but hurt me for the past couple of months. And yet I still tried to make it work. But every time I did that, I uncovered another one of his terrible secrets. I realized another reason I should leave. But instead of leaving, I gave him opportunities to explain himself.

And somehow, he was the one angry with *me*.

That night, I had gazed into my closet for a half hour, a glass of wine in hand as I wondered what I'd pack if I left. Staring, drinking, I eventually decided on nothing because everything would remind me of Jackson. Then, in my fury, I sat in bed, let the buzz fade, and with a fully sober mind, resolved to talking things out with my fiancé before having any more irrational thoughts.

So on Monday, I awoke shortly after Jackson and found him on the terrace with a cup of coffee. He was half-dressed for work – in black boxer briefs and an unbuttoned dress shirt, his grey tie draped around his neck. He looked undeniably adorable, answering emails with one hand and unsuccessfully trying to button his shirt with the other. I instinctively wanted to help him but instead, I reminded myself of the reason I'd come out here.

"Jackson."

He barely looked up. "What's up."

"I don't know if you've noticed but we've spoken probably a total of eight words since Jake's party."

"Yeah."

You ass, I crossed my arms. "Jackson, can we talk about what happened that night?"

He didn't look up from his phone. "I thought we agreed not to bring it up again because it was ridiculous."

"No, you said it was ridiculous but I still think it's pretty valid," I said, my words measured. "And considering the other dramas we're coming off of this year, you should probably understand why I might be sensitive to the fact that you're getting a little too cozy with another woman. The fact that she's your stepsister and someone you have *history* with only makes it worse."

Jackson finally looked up at me. "History?" he repeated.

As in sex, I wanted to say. But since Jake would be my obvious source on that information, I held back. "Yes. History. History that you've purposely never told me about, that led me to think it was something traumatic and upsetting when it clearly wasn't considering how close you two looked the other night."

Jackson laughed, setting his phone down and standing up. "Christ. This Gabrielle thing's made you paranoid, hasn't it?"

An instant fire lit my eyes. “Are you kidding me, Jackson? Don’t you dare try to make me look like I’m the crazy one here – I’m not.”

“Then what are you? Audra being in town has to do with Jake coming back to New York. You know my mom, Lara. She’s pushy. She wants things her way and what she wants right now is to see me and Jake reaching out to our stepsister. That was why Audra was at the party and that was why I made an effort to talk to her. I can’t help the way she acts around me.”

“You don’t think you were encouraging her behavior by letting her drape her body all over you and rub her foot on your leg?” I asked incredulously.

“Look, she’s not right in the head.” Jackson jabbed his finger against his temple. “She’s crazy. And she’s sensitive. One wrong word and she’ll be running in the other direction and doing something drastic. Last time that happened, my mother blamed me, so forgive me if I’m careful with Audra because I don’t feel like reliving that bullshit again,” Jackson snapped, heading back into the apartment. Heated, I followed.

“What kind of relationship did you two have in the past then? Why don’t you tell me about that?” I asked. “What did you even do that made her leave and why did you make it seem like it was about her and Jake when it was clearly about you?”

“Jake never gave her a fucking chance,” Jackson muttered, tossing his cup of coffee into the sink.

As in he never slept with her? I felt my lips itching to bring that up. “I thought you were going to work,” I said instead as I watched Jackson pick up a packed leather duffel and place it by the door.

“I told you last week that I’d be in Boston for two days.”

“I don’t remember that. Who are you seeing?”

Knotting his tie, Jackson smirked at me. “It’s a business trip. Caleb’s going too, so ask him if you still think that I’m going away to play footsies with Audra.”

My lip curled. “I’m glad you can still make jokes when you know I’m upset.” When Jackson rolled his eyes, I felt my control breaking. I wanted to drop the bombshell on him – that I knew what he’d done with his stepsister ten years ago. But instead, I blurted it as a question. “Did you sleep with her or something?”

Jackson froze in the middle of tying his tie. His eyes were suddenly an icy blue and the ends of his lips quivered. An odd noise escaped the bottom of his throat. But just as I thought I was set to hear a confession, Jackson broke into a loud, mocking laugh. It continued for longer than I appreciated before he finally spoke again. "So you *are* paranoid," he concluded.

"I am not paranoid, Jackson, I'm just seeing things about you lately that make me really question if I know who the hell you even are!" I seethed.

But Jackson ignored me, laughing bitterly as he went upstairs.

When he came back down fully dressed, he grabbed the duffel at the door and barely looked over his shoulder at me before leaving "I'll be back Wednesday morning. Hopefully you'll be acting like yourself again when I get back," he muttered. "And by the way, I don't want to come home and hear about you hanging out alone with Sawyer or any of the guys," he added before leaving.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was probably childish, but I called Sawyer that very afternoon, asking if he wanted to join Sloane and me at the Yankees-Red Sox game. It wasn't totally unusual – Sawyer and I often went to galas and events together while Jackson was away. Knowing that he could only look and not touch, Jackson never minded. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the fact that one of his friends was so willing to "babysit" me while he was gone.

But apparently, that had changed.

Too bad, I thought as Sloane and I waited for Jake and Sawyer in our ground level seats along the first base line. Jackson had left me so livid my hands shook as I stood alone in the middle of our apartment. But I refused to let him ruin another day of mine while he went off to laugh and drink with new investors. So I called the two most fun people I knew – Sloane and Sawyer.

And because heat was still coursing through my body, I had Sawyer invite Jake.

"Okay, so here's what I know about baseball," Sloane announced, already tipsy off half a beer. "There is a ball, a bat, three bases and a bunch of guys wearing too much clothes for me to really evaluate their bodies."

"Well, you can see a lot of forearm, and I know how you like forearms."

"*Yes*, I do!" Sloane clapped excitedly, as if only just remembering this about herself. "I wish Caleb showed his off more often 'cause the first thing I ever even noticed about him was his – oh my God! You know what they should invent? Suits for men that end at the elbow, so we can see more forearm."

I snorted at her drunken rambling. "I don't know about that one, Sloane."

"Are you telling me you don't want Jackson to wear a short-sleeved tux at your wedding?" she giggled, feigning shock. But the smile slid off my face as she mentioned my wedding. For some reason, the word "wedding" jolted me. I hadn't thought about mine in what felt like ages. I'd also blown off a couple appointments to check out venues and had yet to reschedule my meeting with the calligrapher. The wedding didn't even feel like something real to me anymore. Sloane frowned as she studied me.

“Are you not excited for your big day?” she asked. “You can tell me. I’m the girl who’s been engaged to her fiancé for ten months with no wedding plans yet because neither of our families can agree on where to have it.”

I cracked a smile. “Thank you but don’t worry. It’s nothing, I’m just… stressed out. And Jackson’s been acting a little difficult lately so it’s making me a little less excited to spend the rest of my life with him,” I muttered. “But I think I’m just being a brat,” I added hastily, just to relieve Sloane. I could see her brows knitting as she mentally prepared to have a long pep talk with me. But now, she exhaled with a smile.

“No, I get it, babe. I’m a brat too. I don’t want to have this wedding unless it’s exactly like I imagined as a little girl but I also don’t have the energy to plan it myself but I also can’t pick a wedding planner to do it for me till I know if I’m getting married in New York or Kentucky. It’s such an ordeal.”

“Oh, fuck me.”

I sat up straight when I heard Sawyer’s voice behind us.

“You two aren’t going to be talking about your weddings all day, are you?” he asked, a big grin gleaming out from under the bill of his worn-in Yankees cap. “’Cause that’ll kind of kill my buzz every time I hit on you,” he cracked as he took the seat beside Sloane.

As he did, I turned around to see Jake charming the hell out of a trio of Long Island moms in the row behind me, fielding their questions about his height and whether or not he used to play sports, since they clearly weren’t going to let him pass till he did so. Holding back laughter, Sloane and Sawyer turned around to watch with me.

“Ah, ah, ah. Don’t you try to get past me till you put your number in this phone,” said the middle one, who patted her big hair as she held out an iPhone dressed in leopard print casing. I bit my lip as I watched Jake laugh that sexy laugh, instantly melting all three women.

“I’d love to but I don’t think my girlfriend would appreciate that,” he said.

“Well, she ain’t here, so who cares?” Big Hair asked boisterously.

“Ah, actually, she is here,” Sawyer cut in. His arm around Sloane, he pointed at me. *Okay then.* Realizing our game, my lips stretched into an awkward smile and I waved at the women.

“Oh,” Big Hair said, eyes on me. “Look at her.”

“She’s gorgeous,” her friend chimed in.

“Beautiful. Beautiful couple,” Big Hair nodded approvingly. “But you better watch it,” she pointed a manicured finger at me. “The second you break his heart, I’m swoopin’ in!”

Laughing, I nodded in understanding and helped Jake into the seat next to mine. My cheeks burned hot as he looked at me with a crooked smile. “Hey, babe,” he said, draping an arm around my shoulder, the way any boyfriend would his girlfriend. I bit my lip, silently thrilling in our little charade.

“Hi, sweetie,” I murmured, relishing the words that sounded normal but felt so naughty. “How was your day?”

Jake grinned something irresistibly cute. “It was good. Productive. Got a lot of work done at the office. Ordered all the material we need for the remodeling.”

“I see,” I nodded, trying to think of more lines for our game. “Well… the kids missed you while you were gone,” I blurted with a giggle. When Jake winced, I followed suit. “Sorry, was that too weird?”

“No, just too close to home. I’m sure you know my mom. She’s been asking me to give her grandkids since I graduated college.”

“Actually, she’s told me that she’s given up on you, which is why she’s turned to bothering me about them.”

Jake’s eyes glimmered with amusement as he bought four beers, two of which went to Sawyer since Sloane was already getting too drunk. “Well, that’s a relief but I do apologize about transferring the burden to you.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I don’t want kids, I just can’t imagine having them anytime soon.”

Jake watched with amusement as I sipped carefully at my spilling beer. “Why’s that?” he asked, mindlessly wiping a drop that had spilled onto my lap. In shorts, my bare thighs reveled in his touch. But I tried not to be obvious about it.

“Um, I don’t know. My parents had me and my sister too young so it makes me wary ‘cause – ” My sentence cut short just as our shortstop hit a line drive down the first base line. I held my breath as he ran, Sawyer’s cheers piercing my ears as our man on third slid home. Grinning, I peered over and watched him sit back down and carefully explain what just happened to Sloane. Jake watched them for a moment, laughing too before picking up where I’d left off.

“It makes you wary because?”

“Oh. Well, they were twenty-one and twenty when they had Riley, and it just took a long time for them to get on their feet and learn to be the parents they are now. They were better with me but when Riley was growing up, they were still too young and self-absorbed. They definitely made a lot of mistakes with her that kind of… stuck.”

Jake frowned. “Is she doing okay now?”

I tugged on the collar of my old Jeter shirt. “Um. I don’t know,” I said, my voice higher pitched than usual. “She kind of… ran away when she was thirteen. Had a big fight with my mom and then walked out the front door and just never came back. She didn’t even pack a bag,” I said, realizing that a decade-and-a-half later, I still found that bizarre. Peering over at Jake’s troubled look, I tried to lighten the mood. “She was like a more extreme version of you,” I joked. “I mean I never talk about her much with Jackson but whenever I do, he brings up you.”

“Sorry about that.” Jake’s brow furrowed. “It’s not exactly comparable. You were a lot younger. It must’ve been harder to understand.”

“It was. She might not have loved my parents but she definitely loved me.” A smile touched the corner of my lip as I let myself remember Riley. “I know she probably stole half that stuff but she used to come back from seeing her friends and bring me random little gifts. Every time. Candy, lip gloss, stickers, earrings. She was like a pretty blonde Santa.”

Jake smiled. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“Six years ago. No – seven. According to her email, she lives in Hawaii now. On the Big Island. I think she’s married.”

“You’re not sure if she’s married or not?” Jake cocked his head.

I laughed, realizing how ridiculous that sounded. “Well, she kind of talks in code when she emails us her little updates. I think it’s her way of keeping us informed but at a distance. By giving us the bare minimum of information,” I said. My lips formed into a pout when I caught Jake still frowning so handsomely. “Don’t look like that. It’s not this dark part of my life anymore. I mean if she hadn’t left, I might not have ever gotten so close to Sloane, and if I’d never gotten close to Sloane, I would’ve never moved to New York and met – ” My throat closed up, as if only just realizing the end of my sentence.

“Jackson,” Jake murmured, finishing it for me. He squinted in the sun as he gazed out at the field. “Have you guys been okay?” he asked quietly.

“Not really. You two?”

“Haven’t talked much,” Jake replied, lowering his voice. “I don’t think my coming back to New York was what he imagined it’d be. It’s different than him visiting me in Australia or Nicaragua. It’s not a vacation when we’re here. It’s always business, whether it has to do with work or family. There’s always some drama when we’re both in this city. Because this is where it all started.”

“Why did you come back here at all?” I asked curiously.

“Jackson. He called me back because he said he was going through some shit and he just needed me around to talk him down from doing something stupid. But it’s like he changed his mind when I got here. He hasn’t told me anything about what’s going on, besides the hotel being unfinished. And honestly, it doesn’t feel the same between us, anyway. I feel obligated to him because he’s my blood but I also get the sense that I don’t know who he is anymore. Every time I go away and come back, it feels like he’s become more and more like one of those guys. The Dane McNulty types.” Jackson grimaced at his own words. “I mean I pray to God I’m wrong considering what a piece of shit Dane is, but that’s just what I’ve been sensing. And I guess it’s coming off of me because Jackson’s definitely been taking his time to warm up to me since I got back. I’m guessing he hasn’t rebuilt his trust yet since he hasn’t yet mentioned…” Jake trailed off, his eyes flitting past my shoulder.

“Gabrielle,” I whispered, shuddering at the sound of her name. I didn’t realize how disturbed I looked until I heard Sawyer’s voice.

“What’s wrong with Lara?” he asked Jake before turning to me with a devilish grin. “Is Jake being a shitty boyfriend? Since, you know, he’s your boyfriend today?”

I laughed and squeezed Jake’s knee. “He’s being the perfect boyfriend, Sawyer,” I answered, sucking my lip back as I felt Jake’s muscled thigh twitch under his jeans.

“He’s a better boyfriend than you are,” Sloane crossed her arms at Sawyer. “Since you won’t walk me to the bathroom.”

“We have two on and none out, why can’t you go to the bathroom yourself?” he sputtered.

“Because I don’t know where it is!” Sloane said. For a pampered girl, that was a perfectly logical reason. I grinned, watching them bicker like children.

“Sawyer, don’t be a shitty boyfriend. Take her to the bathroom,” I finally broke it up, blowing kisses when he groaned and took Sloane’s hand, dragging her out of the aisle like a begrudging brother.

When I turned back to Jake, I saw a wince twitching in his laugh. “What?” I asked, but I didn’t need an answer when I saw him spreading his legs to make more room for himself in his jeans. “Oh,” I breathed, realizing what was going on. “All I did was squeeze your knee,” I giggled quietly, my heart thumping as I let myself lean into him. The second I nestled closer, he kissed the top of my head.

“I know,” he murmured, a laugh in his voice. “But you can pretty much walk a straight line and get me hard as a rock.”

I smiled as he pushed my hair back and kissed my neck. Heat radiating my skin, I closed my eyes. “Jake, we can’t…”

“I have to.” He lifted his mouth to mine, kissing me so gently that I instantly needed more. “This is the only time I’ll ever get to pretend that you’re mine,” he whispered against my lips, kissing me again. A tingle darted between my legs as he slid his tongue between my lips. I knew I should but I couldn’t stop it anymore. I kissed him back – deep and passionate in a way that made me feel a release.

Cupping his jaw, I started over in my head. For those few seconds, I imagined that I’d met Jake after college, on some vacation. We had fallen instantly, hopping beaches, islands, different tiki bars. Aside from the constant traveling, we lived a low-key life. No drama, no cheating, no getting back at each other in strange ways. We were just a normal couple and this was just a regular day. After the game, we’d go home, make dinner and spend too long picking out a movie to watch. And at night, a massage in bed would turn into sex.

It was the simplest fantasy I’d ever had but it took my breath away.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I awoke the next morning to see Sloane next to me in bed. It took a second for me to remember that she had slept over last night. After the game, we'd gone to a nearby bar with the boys, where Sawyer had proposed a game of pool, girls versus guys. Every time a shot was made, the other team drank. And every time I went up, I felt Jake's eyes on my backside. If I needed confirmation of it, I looked up at Sawyer, who'd be laughing or shaking his head at Jake over my shoulder.

"I know, brother. It's painful," he said during a shot that had me half seated on the table, angled in a way that pinched my waist and flared my hips. After sinking the ball, I glanced over my shoulder to throw a triumphant smirk at Jake, but before I could, I felt him yank me into his chest by my hips, pulling my ass against the zipper of his jeans. My eyes went wide as he whispered in my ear about how sexy I was. His erection pressed against me, I stared across the table at Sawyer and Sloane, my mouth wide open as they just laughed drunkenly.

"Damn, you guys are getting a little too convincing!" Sloane giggled. She was too gone to notice anything off but as I rolled out of bed to her sleep, I recalled a moment that struck fear in my heart. It was something Sawyer had said to me while we both watched Jake shoot for the eight ball. It had been quiet but the air had been thick and I could tell that he was waiting for the right moment to speak.

"If something were going on," he finally started, his eyes glazed over from the whiskey, "I'd be behind you on it. I'd understand why," he finished, his gaze sliding from Jake to me. As drunk as he was, I could hear something deliberate in the way he spoke. But by the time I asked what he was talking about, it was his turn to shoot. And in no time, the moment was lost amid all the shouting and drunken laughter.

"Speak of the devil," I murmured to myself when my phone lit with a text from him. I opened it hastily.

You were probably too drunk to remember but the deal last night was that loser had to buy a massive hangover-curing lunch the next day. You lost. It's noon. We're hungry.

~

Lunch was in SoHo because Jake had crashed at Sawyer's penthouse on West Broadway. Since it was close by, we went to Broome Street Kitchen, the place where I had first realized that *Max* was in fact Jake. It had been a gut-wrenching realization then but today, I could vaguely laugh about it. As Sloane and I approached the boys' table, I wiggled my lips, trying to suppress my amusement as Jake sat beside Sawyer, his gorgeous eyes gleaming at me with a sexy hint of mischief.

"Hey." His voice was still scratchy, as if he'd only woken up minutes ago. The sound of it made me long to be in bed with him.

"Morning, losers," Sawyer greeted us jovially. "How we feeling?"

"It's not exactly morning anymore," I laughed, glancing at my phone, "but I feel fine."

"Well, I feel like crap," Sloane pouted. "And I'm so tired of this place. Don't you boys ever go anywhere besides here and Buccieri?"

Sawyer blinked. "Not really, no."

"Well, that's stupid," Sloane grumbled, ever the grouch when hung over or sick. I glanced at Jake, exchanging a little laugh as she continued to lament over the menu. "This isn't what I want. I don't want any of this. I want a burger. Or a bagel. I don't want a *croustillant.* Did I even say that right? Oh, who fuckin' cares."

"Shit, she's cursing," Sawyer said seriously, knowing well that Sloane only swore when truly enraged. Heaving a sigh, he nodded out the door. "Well, if you're really upset, go outside and get a bagel."

"By myself?" Sloane asked, aghast.

"Yes, Princess. Or you know what – Jake will take you."

Jake lifted an eyebrow. "I will?" He turned to look at Sloane, whose tantrum had her tossing a menu on the floor with boredom. "Yeah, okay, I will," he nodded, flashing me a quizzical look before sliding out of the booth. I watched him go, feeling a little wary myself as he left me alone with Sawyer. Somehow, I had a feeling I knew what he was going to say.

"Pretty bad hangover?" I asked when he didn't break the silence first.

"Not my worst," he laughed, scanning the menu. "So, you remember anything from last night?" he asked after a beat of silence.

"The important things," I replied.

Finally, Sawyer looked up, a serious look in his dark eyes. "Yeah. I don't know if you know or if you figured it out but I saw you and Jake kissing at the game." I had suspected as much but I swallowed hard, my

eyes dropping into my lap. “But I’m not saying this to shame you, Lara. I doubt you remember, but I said something to you last night at the bar – ”

“That if something was going on between me and Jake, you’d be behind it.”

“Yes.”

I looked up at him, wrenching my hands under the table. “Why would you be behind it?” I asked, despite not really wanting the answer. I remembered what he’d drunkenly said on the yacht in Ibiza, right before Jackson proposed. *“I know a lot of things. Things that you’d wanna know.”* I always assumed he was talking about Gabrielle since he’d seen them that night, but suddenly, sitting alone with him, I feared that there was something more. After all, he had said that he knew “*things*,” which was plural. *Or maybe you’re just being crazy*, I told myself. “Listen, I know you know about Gabrielle,” I blurted, unable to take the suspense. “Dane told me you were there. But is there something else you know beyond that?” I asked, hating the desperate tone in my voice.

Sawyer ran a heavy hand over his stubble. There was a long pause before he answered, “Yes.”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head with mounting fury. Of course. Of course there was something else with Jackson. There always was and I’d simply found out too late. “What is it, Sawyer?” I asked, opening my eyes to find myself staring through tears.

Sawyer took a deep breath, rubbing his face with both hands. “I wanted to tell you but I wasn’t sure if it was true and I had to make sure before I made an accusation that could ruin someone’s – ”

“Sawyer. I know. It’s fine. Just tell me, please,” I said hastily, my heart beating faster as Sawyer’s lip began to curl with disgust. He pressed his fist against his mouth, as if needing to suppress his anger in order to speak. When he finally did, instant fear burned in my chest.

“You know the man who broke into your apartment?”

I stared. A cold sweat prickled my skin. “Yes,” I said, my voice dead, hollow. I waited for Sawyer to continue but he didn’t, once again choking back revulsion. “Sawyer, what about him? Who is he?” I pleaded for an answer but when he finally opened his mouth to speak, it snapped back shut, his fingers curling into a fist.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” he muttered to himself as he stared past me.

Turning around, I expected to see Jake and Sloane but instead, I saw a stunning brunette in an impossibly short dress – joined by *him*.

Dane Fucking McNulty.

"No fucking way. Holy *shit!*" he clapped, his volume startling the adjacent tables. "Look at you two. Like fuckin' deer in headlights," he laughed, his grey eyes twinkling with true excitement as he strolled to us. "Sawyer." Dane slapped a heavy hand onto his shoulder. "I don't know if I should congratulate you or punch you in the fuckin' head, you fuckin' dog."

"Get your hand off of me," Sawyer flung him away. Dane held his hands up, feigning hurt.

"Really, dude? I was actually going to say good job on growing some balls and doing what you said you'd do that night we saw Jackson and Gabby together." As Sawyer's face reddened, Dane turned to me with mock sympathy. "Not to bring Gabby up again. I know it's a sore subject. But I'm guessing it's what made this coupling happen, right?" He pointed back and forth between us before looking at me. "By the way, I couldn't be happier to know that you're the cheating type."

"This isn't what you think it is, Dane," I bit back. "I'm sure your sick mind disagrees but there *is* such thing as a non-sexual encounter."

A slow grin spread Dane's lips. "Goddamn, I've heard about that sharp tongue," he murmured, eyeing between my mouth. He turned to Sawyer. "How was it, brother? As good as Jackson says?" When no words came out from between Sawyer's gritted teeth, Dane returned to me. "You know, Jax brags a lot about you, sweetheart. Lots of stories but my personal favorite is the one about the time I went into his office to discuss some shit but you stayed kneeling under his desk and kept sucking on his dick like such a good little – "

Sawyer jumped to his feet. "Listen, it's time for you to shut your fucking mouth," he hissed, inches from Dane's face. "Don't talk to me like that and don't talk to her at all. This isn't what you think it is but I don't owe you an explanation so why don't you walk the fuck away and go have lunch with that poor girl over there who doesn't know what kind of disgusting fucking prick you are," he muttered, walking forward and forcing Dane back. Dane only sneered.

"Fuck, you guys are such a drag these days. You, Jackson, all of you," he shook his head. "Don't worry, I'll make things exciting for you guys

again. I have a feeling Jax would love to hear about his fiancé fucking one of his oldest friends."

Sawyer's jaw twitched but he swallowed whatever words were on the tip of his tongue. Glaring, he watched Dane till he was seated across the restaurant. Then, he grabbed Jake and Sloane's coat and nodded out the door. "Come on," he said. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Chapter Twenty-Five

That night, I sat violently shaking in the hot bath Jake had drawn for me in his soaking tub. It had taken some coaxing but I'd finally gotten Sawyer to finish what he had begun telling me at Broome Street Kitchen. He said it all quickly before Jake or Sloane could return, and what he revealed made me so instantly sick that my knees buckled. His arms had caught me before I hit the floor but a part of me wished that he'd just let go. I wanted to fall. I wanted to crash and shatter into a million pieces.

It had been a suspicion of mine but now I knew – everything I ever had with Jackson had been a lie. I had no idea who he was. All I knew was that he was a master manipulator – someone who knew exactly how to get his way, no matter how much money or many connections it took. Some way, somehow, he found a way to bend life in is favor.

And when it came to keeping me, he'd do just about anything.

"Say the word, Lara, and I'll kick Dane's fuckin' ass," Jake said, leaning against the basin sink. I hadn't told him what Sawyer had revealed about Jackson. I was afraid of his reaction. After all, I needed to confront my fiancé. I couldn't risk Jake beating him to death, so I went ahead and let him believe that it was Dane who had rattled me.

"Don't kick his ass, he's not worth it," I murmured.

"If you're worried about Jackson thinking that you've been having an affair with Sawyer, he has no reason to believe Dane."

"I'm not worried about Jackson," I muttered.

"Why not?"

I lifted my blank gaze at Jake. "Because I'm leaving him tomorrow."

Jake stared with surprise. "What?"

"I just can't do it anymore. I can't take the lies. He has all these skeletons in the closet and I'm finding them one by one and I'm not even close to finished, I know it. And it makes me realize that he's not the person I fell in love with anymore. Maybe he never was. You said yourself that he keeps changing more and more into someone like Dane. Someone with no morals or conscience or regard for anything but his image and his pleasure. I don't even know if he loves me. All he loves is the fact that everyone else loves me – that I make him someone to be jealous of. I mean he's told you about me over the years. What did he ever say? Did he ever

tell you stories about me? About the things I believed in, the things that I loved? You didn't know any details about me. Where I came from. About my parents and how I had a sister who ran away. Because I'm sure all Jackson ever told you about was how good I looked in a dress, or how Sawyer couldn't take his eyes off of me one night, or how I charmed his investors at a dinner and won him new business. I'm not the love of his life – I'm just a prize that he refuses to let go of because he knows other people might want me. So I'm done." Taking in a deep, shaky breath, I gathered my composure. "I'm telling him tomorrow when he gets back from Boston. I already took the ring off," I said, nodding at the floor where I'd tossed the massive diamond. As Jake looked in disbelief, I unplugged the drain with my foot and watched the water in the tub sink away, gurgling and choking on its way down.

"Where are you going to go?" Jake finally asked.

"Anywhere but there."

"You can always stay here," he said. I looked up at him, hugging my legs to my chest, my hair only wet at the ends. He gazed at me with a kindness so pure I felt my lip trembling. "Or we can keep you in Manhattan," he offered lightly. "I have a warehouse apartment in the Lower East Side. It's not furnished yet but if you want to stay in the city, we can decorate it for you. Customize it, make it your haven."

I blinked back the tears I felt coming. "No. I don't want that."

Jake nodded. "That's fine. I'll give you what you want, Lara. Once you know what it is, just tell me and I'll make it happen."

"I know what it is," I said. Rising to my feet, I stepped out of the tub and went to Jake, feeling his shallow breath as I slid my hands up his abs. "I want to be wherever you are," I murmured, looking at my hands on his chest. "I know you're not going to stay here for long. Not with how it's been with Jackson. Once the hotel opens, you're going to leave. And I know you always go somewhere far away and make a life there, so when you do that, I want to go too," I exhaled, my growing excitement snatching my breath. "And I don't want you to feel like you're obligated to me. I want us to do what we're doing now for however long it lasts for. All I want is to do that wherever you go. So you can show me how to start over."

Once I was done, I looked up at Jake, fearing his reaction. He wasn't quite smiling but I saw something in his eyes that I hadn't seen from him

yet. Relief. I breathed easy as he took my hands and brought them to his lips, kissing my fingertips before leaning down to kiss me.

"I'll make that happen for you," he said softly. "For us. I need to feel you somewhere besides here. Somewhere where it's just us so I don't have to worry or even think about anything besides you."

I closed my eyes, a wave of happiness crashing through me, washing me anew. "Thank you," I whispered, kissing Jake deeply as his strong hands formed around my naked waist. I could already feel it – his touch bringing me somewhere else. To a place where the chaos didn't exist.

On his bed, he took his time trailing his lips over every inch of my body. Between kisses to my stomach, my breasts, he shed his shirt and his jeans. Naked against me, I felt his warmth, moaning at every touch of his skin on mine. I arched my back into him as his hot mouth teased my breasts. They were sensitive, heavy with arousal and every last stroke of his tongue and fingertips was like pure bliss. He felt like a drug. The exact remedy that I needed.

"I want to make you feel nothing but good, Lara," he murmured.

"Yes. Please," I panted, delirious. I raised my hips for him when I felt his breath between my legs. "*Oh God*." My fists pulsed around his sheets as his tongue drew hot, wet circles over my clit. The cries that spilled my lips were an emotional release. I needed this. I needed Jake. I felt nothing but good when his body was pressed against mine and in this moment, I needed that feeling more than anything in the world.

"You're so wet," he groaned deep against me as he felt my muscles tighten. Sliding his hands under my ass, he lifted me higher for his mouth, spiraling me into ecstasy as he slid his tongue inside my pussy. I cried toward the ceiling, my walls tightening around him as he tunneled deeper than I ever thought possible.

"Jake, I'm going to come," I gasped, my stomach was taut, my body trembling as he brought every inch of me to a screaming orgasm.

That night, while we lay in bed, we talked about all the places in the world that I dreamt of seeing. Before finally drifting off to sleep, we did what I always hated – his flesh pulsing inside me, we made love. It was the only way to describe it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next morning, I returned to Jackson's apartment to find him sitting in silence on the stairs.

He was hunched forward, already staring at me with a wolf-like expression. Frozen, I briefly considered walking back out. But then I remembered that I was there for a reason. I was there to return my ring and to tell him that it would be my last time stepping foot in his duplex.

But the rage in his blazing eyes and rigid torso told me he had something to say as well. And after my run-in with Dane yesterday, I sensed that I knew what it was. I watched a sneer form on his lips as he began to speak. "I take it you're coming from Sawyer's?" Jackson said, his calm voice contradicting everything about the way he looked.

I tossed my purse on the floor. "No," I answered, walking in neat steps to the kitchen counter, dropping my ring on the metal surface with a hard *clack*.

The sound brought Jackson flying to his feet. His sheer speed made me stumble backward in shock. "What do you think you're doing?" he snarled, snatching the ring off the table. "You think you're going to cheat on me with fucking Sawyer and then fucking leave me? After everything, you want to humiliate me like that?"

"After everything?" I had to laugh in his face. "Oh, you mean how you hid the fact that you *fucked* your stepsister, cheated on me with Gabrielle and then hired a criminal to *attack* me in our own home?" My eyes were wild as I watched Jackson back down for a second. "Yes, I know about that," the words seeped from my throat with revulsion. "I know that the son of a bitch who came in here and acted like he was going to fucking *rape* me was someone you fucking *hired* off of Dane McNulty. I mean do you actually feel good about that, Jackson? You manipulated me into loving you again by having a strange man put his hands on me and toss me around and put me through the worst trauma of my life!"

Jackson's jaw was so tight I could hear his teeth gnashing against each other. "It wasn't supposed to get that far. If you hadn't seen his face, he wouldn't have – "

"I don't care, Jackson! You hired a dangerous man to not only scare me but *hurt* me. I couldn't sleep for a month after that. I still wake up with

nightmares about that night and you know what, it'd probably happen every night if it weren't for the fact that you're constantly giving me new things to fucking wake up crying over."

Jackson walked into me, a snarl on his face. "I love you, Lara."

"You have a twisted way of showing it, then," I hissed. But no matter how much I pushed him away, he came back.

"I told you the deal. I told you not to sleep with anyone I knew," he muttered. "And the fact that it was Sawyer? I've watched you two flirt for years and I never said a word because I thought it was stupid. Harmless. But the second you get the chance, you go to house and suck his dick and let him fuck you however he – "

"Oh my God, are you hearing yourself?" I gasped. "Surprise, Jackson, it wasn't Sawyer. I know you go to Dane McNulty for a lot of shady shit but his word on who I fucked is completely wrong."

"Funny, you sure believed him when he said that I slept with Gabrielle two years ago."

"Sawyer saw you too so don't even try to compare that," I laughed bitterly, pushing past Jackson and storming up the stairs. I'd thought that when I left, there'd be nothing for me to pack as everything would remind me of Jackson, but there was in fact one thing left that I desperately needed. Ignoring Jackson's footsteps, I paced into the bedroom and into my closet. When I emerged, he stood there, his frosty eyes locked on my passport.

"And where do you think you're going?" he asked with an eerie calm.

"Away. You can sleep with whoever the hell you want now."

Jackson's strides quickened as he trailed me down the hall. "What, you need to run off with Sloane again?"

"No, I need to leave New York and never come back."

My sentence barely finished before Jackson was in front of me, eyes wild. "You're not leaving me, Lara. The world already knows that we're getting married."

"So what? This isn't about your ego, Jackson, or your friends finding out that I left you. It's about the fact that you're as good as a fucking criminal and I'll never for a second want to spend the rest of my life with you again," I hissed. But when I stepped to pass him, he blocked me.

"I want you, Lara. I don't want anyone else. I gave you that ring, I announced to the world that you were mine. We're going to get married,

and that's that."

I'd never laughed with fury before but this moment was as good as any for that first. "No. No, Jackson. We're not getting married and we never will. So on top of being a despicable monster, I guess you're fucking insane if you really think you can tell me what to do."

With that, I pushed past him and down the stairs, traveling faster than I ever had in a pair of heels. Shoving my passport into my purse, I made a beeline for the door. But as I waited for the elevator, I could hear Jackson returning calmly from upstairs. My back turned, I heard his footsteps – one by one, slow and ominous as they returned to me in no rush at all.

"Here," he said, a sneer in his voice.

I heard the *whoosh* of something flying through the air. Following that came the sound of something hard and something soft dropping onto the floor. I told myself not to turn around but with dread pitting in my stomach, I spun on my heel.

When I saw it, my knees gave out. My nails scratched hardwood as my stomach lurched forward, my heartbeat thumping harder and harder till my insides rattled.

It was my shirt spattered in Gabrielle's dried blood. Beside it was a little jump drive.

"It has her voicemail in it," Jackson said casually, hands in his pockets as he looked down at the shirt, the jump drive, and me. "I had it in a safe."

The room spun as I looked up at him. "You kept all this? Why – why would you do this?"

"I could ask you the same," he said. "You think I'm the one with secrets but since the night that you saw me watching my little video with Gabrielle, you've been rash. Unpredictable. You have any idea how much you scared me when you came back covered in her blood? You told me you'd never been in a fight in your life but now you're the kind of girl who comes home wearing some other girl's blood? The fact that she was missing the next day was just… unreal to me. I mean how was I supposed to know what you were going to do next? Attack Audra, maybe? Or any other woman you saw me talk to?"

I crawled to my feet and backed up two steps. "You know I didn't kill Gabrielle."

"I don't want to know, Lara. I've spent this summer wrestling back any thought that makes me wonder if my fiancée is a murderer."

"*Liar*, you know I didn't do it, I know you do!"

"I don't, Lara," Jackson shrugged casually. "But what I do know is that I have this shirt and that voicemail. And if I want, I can get security footage from our building. They'll just dial is back to the night Gabby went missing and they'll see you coming in a bloody mess." His eyes flicked to my passport. "The fact that you want to flee the country right now is just the cherry on top of all this. Unless you want to live running from authorities for the rest of your life, I'd suggest you stay right fucking here where you belong." Ambling over, Jackson tilted his head and cupped my chin, his ice blue eyes studying mine with amusement. "So what do you think now, babe? Do you still want to leave?"

Burning tears streamed down my cheeks as I stared up at him. I hated myself. I hated myself for Gabby and for the fact that Jackson had rendered me speechless, useless. Essentially his hostage.

"I'll take that as a no," Jackson murmured, leaning in to kiss me. When I shrunk away, he pressed me against the door. "Come on. Don't be upset, baby," he said gently, running his thumb over my cheek to wipe a tear. "Everything will be fine again soon. I'll put all those things back in the safe where they belong and no one will ever find them. Unless you want them to. Do you?"

I was shaking so hard my jaw rattled in my skull. "No," I finally managed my choked reply.

"I didn't think so," Jackson took my hand, slipping my engagement ring back onto my finger. He plucked the passport from my hands. "Now let's just forget about this and talk about what I did with Audra and what you did with Sawyer, so we can go back to being normal again." Holding my jaw, he pressed a rough kiss on my lips. "'Cause we're going to go back to normal, babe. We're always going to be us, baby. Everyone's favorite couple, Jackson and Lara."

To Be Continued…

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